

W.E.B. DU BOIS WRITES *THE BLACK FLAME*:
TRACING HIS POLITICAL AESTHETIC AND ITS RELATION TO CURRENT
AESTHETIC MOVEMENTS

A Thesis

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates the political aesthetic project of W.E.B. Du Bois by examining seminal essays in his oeuvre and with a dedicated focus on his last work of fiction, *The Black Flame*. In his political aesthetics, Du Bois brings aesthetic theory into direct conversation with the social and political circumstances of his time, particularly the state of race relations in nineteenth- and twentieth-century America. Art becomes a medium for African-American expression, and consequently, a means to challenge racist propaganda and encourage social freedom and uplift. *The Black Flame* trilogy, published in the last years of Du Bois's life, remains an understudied, yet monumental, work of history and fiction. The trilogy stands as the culmination of Du Bois's thought and research, and as such, is an indispensable resource to understand the evolution and final formulation of his politico-aesthetic theory.

This thesis traces the development of Du Bois's political aesthetics through early works such as *The Souls of Black Folk*, and Du Bois's mid-period in works such as *Darkwater* and "The Criteria of Negro Art." Importantly, I connect the author's political aesthetic project to the contemporary transformative aesthetics movement. Briefly, transformative aesthetics can be defined as both a cultivating sensibility and a creative practice aimed at self-transformation, as well as social and political transformation. I argue that Du Bois's work in political aesthetics demonstrates that the author is an unrecognized, but important, precursor to the transformative aesthetics movement. The interconnectedness of art and politics, and of the aesthetic and the ethical, finds its fullest

and most thorough development in *The Black Flame* trilogy. A close reading of the novels also reveals changes and tensions within Du Bois's political aesthetics project as the author uses the space of the novels for both an introspective and retrospective journey into the social, political, and philosophical issues and insights that occupied his life and career.

DEDICATION

To my loving and patient parents, whom I owe more than I could ever give back.

To my grandparents, whose energy and zest for life I will always remember with a smile and admiration.

To my talented and witty brother: I will always be your number one fan.

To my uncle, whose light burned too bright for this world and who now sits next to the moon as a star.

And, to my Rocco: you are my very heart and soul.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In this thesis, I fill a gap in the scholarship on W.E.B. Du Bois; namely, revisiting the status of his political aesthetic in the final years of his writing. This is an analysis that scholars have yet to apply to the final presentation and culmination of Du Bois's scholarly thought found in the monumental work of fiction and historical research, *The Black Flame* trilogy. The trilogy covers a span of national and global development from 1876 to 1954, including political, social, and economic developments.

Russ Castronovo, in his article "Beauty along the Color Line," provides an insightful look at the evolution of Du Bois's political aesthetic from his early days as editor of *The Crisis*, while highlighting the more explicit elements of Du Bois's considerations of art expounded in his 1924 essay, "Criteria of Negro Art." On the "Criteria of Negro Art," Castronovo writes that Du Bois equated art with a political tool, and asserts the belief in beauty as "instrumental to social justice remained a poignant chord in the writings of DuBois and other *Crisis* regulars."¹ However, Castronovo does not discuss, nor include in his works cited, *The Black Flame*, and whether the latter statement concerning Du Bois still holds true in his decidedly dark and extensive trilogy remains one of the objectives of my thesis; that is, identifying any changes in Du Bois's thought regarding the power and potential of beauty and art to effect social change.

1. Russ Castronovo, "Beauty along the Color Line: Lynching, Aesthetics, and the 'Crisis,'" *PMLA* 121, no. 5 (2006): 1443, 1445.

In *The Art & Imagination of W.E.B. Du Bois*, Arnold Rampersad provides a biographical study of W.E.B Du Bois. Focusing on the author's literary career and professional development, Rampersad provides a still-useful analysis of *The Black Flame*. Although Rampersad's monograph is an important and early contribution to the scarce discourse engaging with the trilogy, the chapter on *The Black Flame* amounts to a general overview of the trilogy rather than an in-depth analysis. Lily Wiatrowski Phillips has written at least two articles that either draw on *The Black Flame* or focus on it exclusively, with her interest in the novels centering on analyses of their style, literary category, and political nuances. For example, in her most recent article on the trilogy, "*The Black Flame Revisited*," she explores and revises a claim made in a previous article, in which she argued that Du Bois's use of historical fiction was an exercise in social realism. In this more recent article, she now admits that the trilogy defies literary categories, and instead, she focuses her analysis on Du Bois's use of recursion and repetition in the novels as a method of storytelling and as a way of thinking about historical events repeatedly from different perspectives:

Du Bois opens the doors for thinking of political change . . . by emphasizing the importance of perspective and offering an opportunity to think about things again and again. What results is a set of works that I would argue profoundly resists closure.²

In Phillips's insightful conclusion, she notes that the novels invite us to continually revisit history and ideas, and to resist understanding history as finished and

2. Lily Wiatrowski Phillips, "The Black Flame Revisited: Recursion and Return in the Reading of W.E.B. Du Bois's Trilogy," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 15, no. 2 (2015): 167.

known. For this reason, the novels themselves model this revisiting and resistance to closure. By inviting us in, by employing techniques of repetition and recursion, we as the readers are joining “Du Bois on a journey of memory and introspection.”³ Although Phillips does not treat the concept of a political aesthetic when analyzing the form and content of the trilogy, her comments on Du Bois’s narrative strategy—the novels’ purposeful resistance to closure—will prove a productive element in my own thesis.

Much of the scholarship on Du Bois, including the works mentioned above, fail to directly examine the status and value of Du Bois’s political aesthetics as it functions within and shapes *The Black Flame* trilogy. Thus, my thesis is an attempt to fill this gap as well as to continue and extend the conversation concerning Du Bois’s use of the political aesthetic, his famous and controversial claim that “all Art is propaganda,”⁴ and to also further the scholarly engagement with these incredibly rich novels.

Therefore, the main questions that my thesis aims to answer are how and to what extent Du Bois’s political aesthetics manifests in *The Black Flame* novels. In revisiting and revealing Du Bois’s final formulation of the political aesthetic, I will highlight the changes and developments in this project from Du Bois’s earlier writings, particularly beginning with his publicized vision for the criteria of African American art in 1926, to a close focus on his last epic of fiction to show the way in which this final formulation of his political aesthetic in many ways remained faithful to his earlier understandings of art

3. Ibid. 168.

4. W.E.B. Du Bois, *W.E.B. Du Bois: Writings*, ed. Nathan Huggins (New York: Library of America, 1986), 1000.

and propaganda. Given that Du Bois's political aesthetics is both controversial and fertile ground, it is important to understand how the very late Du Bois revisited, changed, and reintegrated his views concerning art, aesthetics, and politics, and how his aesthetic project related to and was situated within other central issues of *The Black Flame*, such as racial prejudice and social transformation. And finally, I will examine how the trilogy measures up to Du Bois's own criteria of African American art.

Much past and current scholarship on Du Bois has connected him to canonical figures and placed him within certain well-known and established traditions. For example, David Levering Lewis writes that Du Bois's "philosophy came alive under the guidance of Josiah Royce and William James."⁵ Keith E. Byerman claims that Du Bois's perceptions of history "suggest how his social science can be read in the terms offered by Hayden White . . . that historical writing is essentially narration."⁶ Rampersad comments on the significant influence Gustav von Schmoller had on Du Bois's scholarly focus, while also noting the influence of George Santayana.⁷ Further, Du Bois has been placed within (or connected to) such traditions as Calvinism, pragmatism, socialism, Fabianism, and cosmopolitanism.⁸ It is not my intention to dispute or defend these theses, but rather, to diverge from them. Rather than placing Du Bois within a history, I

5. David Levering Lewis, *W.E.B. Du Bois, 1919-1963: The Fight for Equality and the American Century* (New York: Henry Holt, 2000): 440.

6. Keith E. Byerman, *Seizing the Word: History, Art, and Self in the Work of W.E.B. Du Bois* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2010): 37.

7. Arnold Rampersad, *The Art and Imagination of W.E.B. Du Bois* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 41, 43.

8. See *Cambridge Companion to W.E.B. Du Bois* (2008) and Samuel Doku's *Cosmopolitanism in the Fictive Imagination of W.E.B. Du Bois*.

will bring this historical figure to the present. Du Bois's staunch fusion of art and politics commanded a view of aesthetics not populated by abstract categories to be evaluated solely at the conceptual level. Instead, first and foremost, his is an aesthetics inextricable from, and always related back to, the concrete domain of human life. His is an aesthetics that examines the way in which beauty and ugliness appear and function within the everyday context of lived experience. To this end, I will show Du Bois's place within a contemporary movement, transformative aesthetics, for which I see him as an important precursor.

Transformative aesthetics is a concept and a form of action, which I will expand on in detail in Chapter II; however, it would be useful to provide a brief and preliminary definition here. In *Unmaking Race, Remaking Soul: Transformative Aesthetics and the Practice of Freedom*, Christina Acampora discusses the central assumptions undergirding the diverse collection of essays in this text: namely, that aesthetics is a kind of sensibility, but more than "mere feeling" and beyond the idea of "emotional energy." Aesthetic sensibility is that which "cultivates the senses, including that of sight: it nurtures a different way of seeing . . . a different way of understanding the world, one's place within it, and how the world might possibly be negotiated and reorganized."⁹ Transformative aesthetics can then be defined as both a cultivating sensibility and a creative practice aimed at self-transformation, as well as social and political transformation. Thus, an additional objective of my thesis is not to contextualize

9. Christina Davis Acampora, "Introduction," in *Unmaking Race, Remaking Soul: Transformative Aesthetics and the Practice of Freedom* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), 2.

Du Bois only within the past, but rather to explore his political aesthetics within a dynamic and unfolding movement of the present.

It is important to clarify a distinction I am making between art and the aesthetic, although these two concepts overlap in many ways. Let us start with an early definition of art that Du Bois offers in an unpublished essay, “The Art and Art Galleries of Modern Europe” (1896), written when Du Bois was just twenty-eight years of age. He writes that “Art is beauty created by man; it is something of which a human soul conceives, a human hand executes and all human hearts everywhere acknowledge.”¹⁰ He briefly defines aesthetic nature as one’s “perception and appreciation of” what is really beautiful, and he asserts that true art “is to be measured by our emotions,” those feelings capable of responding “to the lightest touch and most subtle harmony of the work of Art.”¹¹ More than twenty years later he made his controversial pronouncement that “all art is and must ever be propaganda,” that artists, especially black artists, must use truth and goodness towards the creation, preservation, and realization of beauty in order to help the world recognize and share in an ideal of justice.¹² Therefore, we can already see in the younger Du Bois an early and faithful commitment to not only Beauty and beautiful things, but also his recognition that the beauty of art had a power capable of entering deeply into the human spirit and arousing and influencing it. For Du Bois, works of art could be used to communicate human ideals such as truth and goodness,

10. W.E.B. Du Bois, *Against Racism: Unpublished Essays, Papers, Addresses, 1887-1961*, ed. Herbert Aptheker (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), 35.

11. Ibid.

12. Du Bois, *Writings*, 1000.

and such works of art were vehicles for self-expression. Each work of art is a view into how the artist sees and understands the world and how the artist's own unique experiences shape and give form and content to the creative work.

Extending Du Bois's belief that art entails a sociopolitical imperative, I argue that his sense of art extended beyond its creation or appearance as a messiah of truth, but also necessarily included our experience and appreciation of it. As Du Bois maintained, if we are not capable of responding to the beauty of art, to its "highest harmony," then perhaps our aesthetic nature is "in sad need of training."¹³ Given Du Bois's commitment to the relation between beauty, truth, and goodness, his statement that our aesthetic natures are deficient if not capable of responding to the subtle harmonies of beauty seems to imply that art could serve as a metric of our own ethico-aesthetic sensibilities. Art as a product embedded within a dynamic social and cultural context must be relational in its creation and reception. As viewers or readers, art acts upon us and we, in turn, act upon the art, creating an ongoing relation with it and an aesthetic experience that can perhaps serve as a moral metric, reveal truth, and inspire a transformative experience.¹⁴ As such, an artistic creation can be comfortably included under the aegis of the aesthetic—beyond art as an isolatable product or object—into one's experience of it as a social and political happening that invites participation. In other words, Du Bois's conception of art diverges sharply from the "art for art's sake" tradition.

13. Du Bois, *Against Racism*, 35.

14. These claims will be made clearer and elaborated on more fully in my discussion of transformative aesthetics in Chapter II.

Crispin Sartwell makes the argument that “there is no getting rid of aesthetics.”¹⁵ He points out that even political regimes, religious dogmas, and revolutionary movements that claim to be anti-aesthetic and empty of aesthetic commitments, or that disavow aesthetics as a tool for political oppression or ideology, will still do so in *a form* that cannot escape aesthetic dimensions. He further notes that, while aesthetics can be a tool of oppression, it also can be a tool for resistance to oppression.¹⁶ As Du Bois knew, propaganda, whether in the arts or sciences, could be used to maintain oppressive structures and practices. However, Du Bois was deeply stirred when “propaganda is confined to one side” while the other side is forced, through neglect, into silence.¹⁷ For this reason, he demanded that art be a voice, or rather, that black artists put their voices and experiences into their art so that the world could be restored with right, truth, and the freedom of self-expression.

Drawing from Du Bois’s work, most specifically *The Black Flame*, and from recent scholarship on aesthetics—aesthetics conceived of as having political, social, and ethical value—I will show the way in which Du Bois’s understanding of art, aesthetics, and the sociopolitical world made an important, yet under-recognized contribution to the contemporary currents of transformative aesthetics. Du Bois sought to bring aesthetic inquiry down from the purely abstract and to channel it back into the everyday world of human existence, which is as necessarily political as it is ethical. The interconnectedness

15. Crispin Sartwell, “Art and Politics,” *American Society For Aesthetics* 30, no. 3 (2010): 2.

16. Ibid. 1.

17. Du Bois, *Writings*, 1000.

of art and politics, of the aesthetic and the ethical, is manifest in Du Bois's early work, and as I will show, finds its fullest and most thorough development in *The Black Flame* trilogy.

CHAPTER II

W.E.B. DU BOIS'S POLITICAL AESTHETICS AND THE CONTEMPORARY

CURRENTS OF TRANSFORMATIVE AESTHETICS

In Chapter I, I laid the foundations for my thesis, both the aim and scope of my project and the importance of this particular examination into Du Bois's work. A more thorough and focused analysis of Du Bois as an aesthetician will further enrich the scholarship surrounding his life and work. In this chapter, I will discuss Du Bois's political aesthetics by looking at key theoretical pieces in his corpus, as well as an early work of fiction. From this examination, I will reconstruct Du Bois's notion of political aesthetics along the three concepts of goodness, truth, and beauty, and show how these three anchor concepts function within Du Bois's own art. In the second half of this chapter, I will introduce and explain transformative aesthetics and its parallels to Du Bois's aesthetic theory in an effort to demonstrate that Du Bois is an as-yet-uncredited precursor to later trends in philosophical theory that argue a relation between art, aesthetics, politics, and ethics.

Political Aesthetics

As early in his career as 1896, Du Bois posited a practical relationship among goodness, truth, and beauty that signaled new directions for aesthetic inquiry. Du Bois was interested in more than a theoretical relation and pushed for a reconsideration of the function and inter-function of these concepts within the social world. The question for him was not concerning the essential meaning of each; rather more importantly, he

focused on their function. The question centered on how these concepts when taken together could stimulate individual development and social progress. At the outset, the force of this triumvirate was always ethical. In 1896, Du Bois delivered an address to Wilberforce University entitled “The Art and Art Galleries of Modern Europe.” In this address, he declares that “three things in life beckon the human soul: The Good, the True, and the Beautiful.”¹⁸ The good is that “simple goodness . . . the end of all moral strife,” and he locates this within the domain of willpower. Truth means “to search out and make known the real Truth about the world we live in,” and this he called a matter for the mind. The beautiful is that “third dimension in life without which we cannot truly live” and is the realm of heart and emotion.¹⁹

In this same address, Du Bois sets forth preliminary definitions for art and for aesthetic nature. Aesthetic nature concerns the importance of one being able to recognize and appreciate what is beautiful. He equates true art with the “emotions it raises in the hearts of its beholders,” emotions which are also the measure of true art.²⁰ This requires that one’s aesthetic nature—one’s feelings—be so trained as to be capable of responding to “the lightest touch and most subtle harmony of the work of Art.”²¹ Du Bois seems to characterize aesthetic nature as that direct and immediate space of emotional receptivity,

18. W.E.B. Du Bois, “The Art and Art Galleries of Modern Europe,” in *Against Racism: Unpublished Essays, Papers, Addresses, 1887-1961* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), 34.

19. *Ibid.*, 34.

20. *Ibid.*, 35.

21. *Ibid.*, 35.

as well as an ethical response. In other words, a good aesthetic nature is able to receive and recognize the artwork and artist as beautiful.

Du Bois defines art as the “beauty created by man; it is something of which a human soul conceives, a human hand executes and all human hearts everywhere acknowledge beautiful.”²² This statement is rich ground for interpretation and for understanding Du Bois’s definition of art more broadly. That art is beauty created by a human being and which invites recognition and appreciation allows one to move beyond artifact to what one can create of him or herself. The mind and body create beauty as art. It is not a stretch to opine that Du Bois would include under the aegis of beauty the ethical values we can contribute to the world as a way of improving the world’s “form and content.” Such values would be goodness, love, compassion, and truth as a beautiful and artful way of living. Art, then, becomes a way of being, in a manner that is good, beautiful, and true. Therefore, one’s aesthetic nature is one’s capacity to respond to the beauty of a work of art and to the beauty of another person’s being.

There are further important implications to draw from his definition of art. First, Du Bois is asserting a connection between our aesthetic nature and ethical sensibilities. Our aesthetic natures should be able to respond to the beauty created by others without the interference of racial prejudice. A sensitive and cultivated aesthetic nature recognizes and appreciates the beauty created by the artist, and consequently, should recognize and appreciate that artist as enriching and contributing to the beauty of the world. For racial

22. Ibid., 35.

prejudice to interrupt this experience would call into question the ethico-aesthetic nature of the receiver/viewer.

The social and political turmoil of the post-Reconstruction era is always at work in Du Bois's writings. As Du Bois weds aesthetics and ethics, so does he also merge art with social and political considerations. The ethico-aesthetic capacity of the individual, as well as the individual's capacity to recognize others as co-contributors of beauty, is at least in part constructive of the topography of the social and political landscape. Mark Christian Thompson notes Du Bois's repurposing of art and his nontraditional conception of aesthetics. He writes that "art is for Du Bois intimately, definitively, bound to its social function. Beauty, therefore, does not exist for itself; it consists in the marriage between aesthetic form and social-political content."²³ That human hearts can acknowledge a person responsible for beauty as a person rather than a racial other is both the beauty and goodness of a human fellowship divested of racial prejudice. Du Bois understands aesthetic attitudes as being affected (and inhibited) by social and political factors, making aesthetics and art ethical, social, and political matters. Thompson asserts that "for Du Bois, the ability to properly perceive black Beauty is hindered by the racism" in the Western world.²⁴ Du Bois's model of the good, the true, and the aesthetic is meant to call attention to this issue and art's place in the fight.

23. Mark Christian Thompson, "Aesthetic Hygiene: Marcus Garvey, W.E.B. Du Bois, and the Work of Art," in *A Companion to African American Literature*, ed. Gene Andrew Jarrett (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 246.

24. *Ibid.*, 248.

A second implication of Du Bois's definition of art is the placement of bodily power and agency in his aesthetics. A liberated body and a liberated mind free to create and act on one's own will and desire are important aspects of Du Bois's political aesthetics. His project is one of "holistic self-cultivation," as Paul C. Taylor writes.²⁵ That is, Du Bois's aesthetic theory urges the actualization of the power of the body and mind in conjunction with, and contributing to, the cultivation of one's ethical and aesthetic nature. Lastly, that such created beauty is born in the person demonstrates the unavoidable necessity of immersing one's deeper and authentic self into the art work.

Art as created beauty becomes a matter of self-expression and a space to exercise one's desirous will and bodily agency. Therefore, art is an important outlet and vehicle for expressing the truth of one's personhood and experiences. Truth of self and world can be transmuted into art. Putting one's truth into art has double potential for Du Bois: both individual and social potential. The creative and liberating process of making beauty for the world is an act of empowerment and goodness, and it enables a process of self-realization and cultivation for the artist. In addition, such art has the power to counter white supremacist/black inferiority propaganda and transform social and political attitudes. For Du Bois, art exists not art for art's sake. Instead, art is for the sake of living beautifully, understood as living freely and creatively without the oppressions and ugliness of racial prejudice. Art is for the sake of restoring justice and righteousness in the world by a process of introspective and liberating self-cultivation, as well as

25. Paul C. Taylor, "Living Pictures, Dead Souls," *Transition*, no. 104 (2011): 58.

through the communication or transmission of one's truth in an effort to bring into view what is hidden by the dominant culture's class, social, and political forces. In Du Bois's political aesthetics, aesthetic nature merges with thought and emotion and is always pregnant with ethical, social, and political value. Our aesthetic natures signal the degree to which we are capable of allowing ourselves to be touched by the beauty of others, both through their works and their inner lives shining through their works. That some cannot see the difference between what is beautiful and what is ugly, between the beauty of social unity and the ugliness of racial prejudice, Du Bois argues, shows aesthetic natures "in sad need of training."²⁶

In "Of Beauty and Death," in *Darkwater* (1920), Du Bois develops his most philosophical treatment of the subject of beauty. The writing in this essay is deeply sensory and descriptive, but also clever and purposeful in its jarring and contrary juxtaposition of beauty and ugliness. Du Bois remains faithful to an aesthetic theory grounded in the world of human action, and as such, his aesthetic inquiry urges one beyond the borders of the beautiful. The deliberate friction Du Bois creates is evident in his choice to couple concrete instances of racial discord with the beauty of nature. The alternation between beauty and ugliness is sudden and dynamic. Readers are thrown back and forth into a confrontation with, and a glaring comparison between, "the glory of sea and sky and city" and the "little hatefulness and thoughtlessnesses of race

26. Du Bois, "The Art and Art Galleries of Modern Europe," 35.

prejudice.”²⁷ The language Du Bois uses when recounting the beautiful is eloquent, rhythmic, and imaginative, whereas his descriptions of racial hatred, its presence as an everyday social violence, are ordinary and crude and dull in comparison. When describing the beauty of Mount Desert, readers imagine the mountains that “hurl themselves against the stars,” where “above float clouds—white, gray, and inken, while the clear, impalpable air springs and sparkles like new wine.”²⁸ Abruptly, readers are then forced to confront and imagine the ugliness of Jim-Crow cars, the “swagger and noise and stares” and the “plush caked with dirt, the floor is grimy, and the windows dirty.”²⁹

Throughout the essay readers are given vistas of beauty and then scenes of ugliness. In another example, Du Bois delights readers with the “green-gold palms” and the hills “undulant with pine and palm” of Montego Bay³⁰ followed by recollections of the First World War, “the refusal to accept Negro volunteers for the army,” and the riots in East St. Louis, where “white strikers on war work killed and mobbed Negro workingmen.”³¹ The language and the concrete examples in the essay are meant to affect and move the readers from the inside, for them to be stirred and animated by his art. Du Bois brings to the surface the visceral reality of racial discrimination, thereby raising in readers an intensity of emotion as they have alternating experiences of beauty and

27. W.E.B. Du Bois, “Of Beauty and Death,” in *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 110.

28. *Ibid.*, 110.

29. *Ibid.*, 112.

30. *Ibid.*, 113.

31. *Ibid.*, 115.

ugliness. The effects of his essay are to be felt emotionally and bodily, while also causing one to reflect upon the conflicting presence of beauty and ugliness in this world. This aim connects back to Du Bois's assertion in "The Art and Art Galleries of Modern Europe," that true art raises the emotions of the audience. For Du Bois, the purpose of art is not to deny the ugly or painful, nor to exclusively focus on the beautiful, but rather, to communicate the truth of both.

His belief in art as a medium for truth, beauty, and goodness is made more explicit in his 1926 *Crisis* article, "Criteria of Negro Art." Here, he positions art directly in the fight for social justice when he claims that art, specifically art created by African Americans, "is part of the great fight we are carrying on and it represents a forward and an upward look—a push onward."³² Art becomes an intermediate space for each black artist to express his or her self and point of view of the world. Art can be the artist's vehicle for truth and beauty and method of calling attention to past and current social and political issues. This sociopolitical dimension of art places a moral demand on artists; thus Du Bois's famous assertion in the essay: "all Art is propaganda and every must be, despite the wailing of the purists."³³ He directly challenges the notion of art for art's sake. Du Bois positions black art as art for the sake of social progress, but this requires that art act as propaganda for the side that "is stripped and silent."³⁴ It is not the "positive propaganda" of white glorification that Du Bois objects to, but rather "the

32. W.E.B. Du Bois, "Criteria of Negro Art," in *W.E.B. Du Bois: Writings*, ed. Nathan Huggins (New York: Library of America, 1986), 993.

33. *Ibid.*, 1000.

34. *Ibid.*, 1000

denial of a similar right of propaganda to those who believe in black blood human, lovable and inspired with new ideals for the world.”³⁵ The racial pre-judgments found in the white arts and aesthetics distort the truth and inhibit justice. For this reason, it is the “bounden duty of black America to begin this great work of the creation of beauty . . . of the realization of beauty.”³⁶

Thompson claims that Du Bois “denies the primacy of an ethical dimension to his poetics.”³⁷ He bases this claim on a passage he cites in his article and taken from the “Criteria,” in which Du Bois discusses the artists’ use of goodness as a tool for the creation, preservation, and realization of beauty, though “not for sake of an ethical sanction but as the one true method of gaining sympathy and human interest.”³⁸

I argue, however, that in that passage Du Bois is not denying an ethical dimension to his theory of political aesthetics, nor within his own work. Du Bois is specifically referencing goodness. He is denying the use of goodness as a tool for ethical sanction. Instead, he advocates its use for gaining sympathy and human interest, both of which are difficult to sever from the realm of ethics. That passage reflects Du Bois’s understanding of the right way to use goodness as a tool, which does not include its use as a shaming or penalizing measure, but rather for it to appeal to and draw out the humanity that is already within the person. It would be a misinterpretation to see Du Bois as denying an ethical dimension to his whole poetics, especially given the language

35. Ibid., 1000-001.

36. Ibid., 100.

37. Thompson, “Aesthetic Hygiene,” 249.

38. Du Bois, “Criteria,” 1000.

and terminology he uses elsewhere in the essay. The “Criteria” is Du Bois’s call to bring art into the fight for a more just world; for art to be used in one’s efforts to transform social attitudes, race relations, and a disenfranchising political structure. Considering Du Bois’s choice to formulate truth, goodness, and beauty as the criteria for African American art, and given that Du Bois defines goodness as that which is just, honorable, and right, I believe the ethical dimension is central to his theory.³⁹ And although Du Bois writes that goodness is not used as an ethical sanction, he does place truth in the strong position to “expose evil” and “set the world right.”⁴⁰

As I have shown, Du Bois’s political aesthetics is continually anchored by the concepts of goodness, truth, and beauty. However, these concepts manifest in the everyday world through human will power, strength of mind, and through the training or augmenting of our aesthetic natures. This training of our aesthetic natures merges with the moral demand to be the kind of person able to recognize beauty undistorted by racial prejudice. Du Bois was devoted to his notion of art as propaganda because he saw the human soul as inseparable from its artistic expression, and consequently, that art should communicate the truth of one’s self and world as a matter of human, social, and political urgency. In a time of racial prejudice and legally sanctioned white violence, and when movies, literature, and standards of beauty were still pregnant with racial inaccuracies and color prejudice, Du Bois saw the need for art to join in the struggle against

39. Ibid., 1000.

40. Ibid., 995.

discrimination and oppression. Underscoring his conceptions of goodness, truth, and beauty is the urgency for self-development, especially in a world where the ugliness of racial prejudice leads to the unliberated minds and bodies of oppressed individuals. Self-development is invaluable for Du Bois since it involves the realization of one's self, one's worth, and one's freedom and agency.

Du Bois urges the black artist to infuse his or her art with power and purpose. As such, the realm of art is called upon to join in his vision of a world where all people create and realize themselves and where black men and women are “free of mind, proud of body.”⁴¹ His political aesthetics includes the crucial dimension of self-realization as an ongoing stage in one's self-development. Paul C. Taylor makes a similar point when he writes that “I've come to think of Du Bois as a self-realization ethicist, as someone who imagines the good life as an affair of holistic self-cultivation.”⁴²

So far, I have discussed the progression of Du Bois's political aesthetics and its three central concepts of goodness, truth, and beauty, which form the tightly interconnected locus of his political aesthetic project. At this point, it would be useful to delve more deeply into how he defines the concepts at work in his political aesthetics before examining a literary example from his corpus to further understand art being used as propaganda. In 1896, Du Bois defined art as beauty created by the human mind and executed by the human body. He went on to say that such humanly created beauty must

41. Ibid., 1002.

42. Taylor, “Living Pictures, Dead Souls,” 58.

be acknowledged as beautiful by others. This latter statement illuminates his definition of aesthetic nature. One's aesthetic nature is the capacity to be receptive to the beauty of another person and what he or she creates. Du Bois draws a subtle line between an aesthetic nature in need of training and an aesthetic nature capable of responding to even the slightest touch of beauty. It would not be overreaching to suggest that one hindrance to a cultivated aesthetic nature that Du Bois had in mind was prejudice based on color. Someone who rejects or is unable to appreciate beauty because it has been created by a black artist represents a poorly developed aesthetic nature. Du Bois's vision for the black artist is that he or she would be recognized as an artist and as one who creates and contributes to the world's beauty, rather than the artist being recognized by his or her race first, and consequently rejected, ignored, or exoticized for that reason. Instead, well-trained aesthetic natures appreciate the beauty another human being has to offer irrespective of racial pre-judgments. At the end of the "Criteria," Du Bois predicts that "just as soon as the black artist appears, someone touches the race on the shoulder and says, 'He did that because he was an American, not because he was a Negro . . . He is just human; it is the kind of thing you ought to expect.'"⁴³ As always, Du Bois intertwines the aesthetic with the ethical. One's capacity to appreciate beauty merges with what we ought to expect and celebrate in other human beings: their ability to create and contribute to the beauty in this world. The concepts of goodness, truth, and beauty are "unseparated and inseparable" in the concrete, everyday world in which we

43. Ibid., 1002.

live and work.⁴⁴ As such, his ethically imbued aesthetics is inseparable from the social and political world.

It is by looking at and experiencing the everyday world that Du Bois contemplates the meaning and urgency of goodness, truth, and beauty. That these concepts could have an ideal meaning and being in some other eternal realm, he does not deny. However, it is their relation to this world, to the “here and now,” that concerns our pragmatist thinker.⁴⁵ In this world, Du Bois ventures, goodness must be brought about through willpower. In his 1896 address he continues, that “simple goodness is the end of all moral strife.”⁴⁶ In other words, simple goodness consists in our everyday actions toward one another. It is through ordinary kindnesses and manners made ordinary by their being how we (should) commonly treat each other that moral strife reaches an end. In “Of Beauty and Death,” Du Bois rhetorically asks, “for what am I thankful . . . for nothing but the most commonplace of commonplaces; a table of gentlewomen and gentlemen—soft-spoken, sweet-tempered, full of human sympathy, who made me, a stranger, one of them.”⁴⁷ Goodness is simple human fellowship with the absence of racial prejudice both as an ideal end, but also in how we choose to conduct ourselves and treat others each day. At the start of the essay, Du Bois emphasizes the “real fear . . . that you are losing your own soul and the soul of a people.”⁴⁸ In “Of Beauty,” as in the “Criteria,” Du Bois maintains the importance of holding on to and developing one’s

44. Ibid., 995.

45. Ibid.

46. Du Bois, “The Art and Art Galleries,” 34.

47. Du Bois, “Of Beauty,” 117.

48. Ibid., 109.

sense of self in order to contribute to the fight for a free and beautiful life. At the beginning of *Darkwater*, in his brief essay “Credo,” Du Bois also highlights the importance of pride in self and race, “a pride so deep as to scorn injustice to other selves.”⁴⁹ Therefore, goodness also consists in the striving to realize one’s self and worth and to continue on a path of intellectual and moral cultivation.

In *Souls*, in *Darkwater*, and throughout his corpus, Du Bois revisits the glaring contradiction between the presence of beauty and ugliness in this world. Goodness and beauty are synonymous for Du Bois, and in this world, both consist of infinite expressions of the same ideal. Beauty is “love and friendship and creation,” as Du Bois asserts in “Of Beauty and Death.”⁵⁰ That is, beauty is a world of goodness, where human beings regard each other with love and friendship unfettered by racial pre-judgments. A beautiful world, he writes in the “Criteria of Negro Art,” is one where human beings are free to “create, where they realize themselves and where they enjoy life.”⁵¹ For Du Bois, the freedom to create, the self-understanding that is a matter of truth and mind, and feeling one’s bodily agency are expressions of beauty and goodness. A beautiful and good world is one of liberty, freedom, opportunity, and human unity.⁵² However, as Du Bois points out in a 1942 essay, “The Future of Africa in America,” the moral and sociopolitical ideals of the United States are continually hindered and contradicted by its own attitude toward African Americans. He observes that the social advance of black

49. Ibid., 1.

50. Ibid., 110.

51. Du Bois, “Criteria,” 995.

52. W.E.B. Du Bois, “The Souls of Black Folk,” in *W.E.B. Du Bois: Writings*, ed. Nathan Huggins (New York: Library of America, 1986), 425.

men and women in the United States “has been continually frustrated and made paradoxical by our attitude toward Negroes . . . We cannot today discuss democracy . . . or do any one of the thousand things that social uplift calls for, without running across a discrimination with regard to Negroes.”⁵³ Therefore, inescapably tied in with Du Bois’s notions of beauty and goodness is the concept of ugliness and its everyday manifestations.

The ugliness of racial prejudice “remains a heavy fact . . . such curious kinks of the human mind exist and must be reckoned with soberly.”⁵⁴ Race prejudice is a twisted misuse of human reason. In *Souls*, as in all his works, is his method of never neglecting, and always confronting, the ugliness in this world because these are the things “that stand in the way of civilization . . . and common decency.”⁵⁵ Common decency is an expression of goodness and beauty, while the ugly manifestations of racial prejudice include not only riots, mob violence, and lynching, but also the oppressive words and nonviolent behaviors that issue from racist indecency. Still, as he reminds readers in “Of Beauty and Death,” seeing only the ugly is pessimism, and “pessimism is cowardice.”⁵⁶ While one can have an aesthetic experience of ugliness, a cultivated aesthetic nature continues to recognize and remain attuned to the presence of beauty. The concept of ugliness continues to be an increasingly popular theme in aesthetic inquiry. Scholars

53. W.E.B. Du Bois, “The Future of Africa in America,” in *Against Racism: Unpublished Essays, Papers, Addresses, 1887-1961*, ed. Herbert Aptheker (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), 183.

54. Du Bois, “The Souls,” 425.

55. *Ibid.*, 425.

56. Du Bois, “Of Beauty,” 112.

have acknowledged that negative values such as ugliness and revulsion can constitute an aesthetic experience.⁵⁷ One can perceive ugliness and experience it on a visceral and emotional level. While Du Bois does not explicitly categorize ugliness as an aesthetic experience, he addresses ugliness precisely because it is something we can perceive and experience. For this reason, beauty is crucial to counter the prevalence and effects of ugly behaviors, environments, and policies on a society.

Without beauty, we are not truly living. Thus, in “Of Beauty and Death,” Du Bois questions the very line drawn between life and death in a world where racial prejudice denies fellowship, freedom, opportunity, beauty, and creativity to black men and women. If death means the end of our experiences of beauty, friendship, love, agency, and opportunity, then the fullness of life should depend on the fullness of our experiences with what life has to offer. Du Bois’s point in the essay, and a point repeated in the “Criteria,” is that the lives of African Americans lose their life-quality precisely because discrimination blocks their means of flourishing. In the “Criteria,” he writes that beauty’s variety is infinite and “the world is full of it; and yet today the mass of human beings are choked away from it, and their lives distorted and made ugly.”⁵⁸ He concludes “Of Beauty and Death” with the pronouncement that ugliness is “the old evil” that can never satisfy or fulfill.⁵⁹ Beauty “is fulfilment. It satisfies . . . It is the reasonable thing.”⁶⁰ Du Bois, then, also understands the right use of reason as a constructive

57. See Rosenkranz, *The Aesthetics of Ugliness*; Berleant, *Sensibility and Sense*; Pop and Widrich, *Ugliness: The Non-Beautiful in Art and Theory*.

58. Du Bois, “Criteria,” 995.

59. *Ibid.*, 120.

60. *Ibid.*, 125.

element in beauty's creation and preservation. This further demonstrates his merging of the good, or ethical, with beauty. In *Souls*, Du Bois argues that a beautiful world can be brought about by the "breadth and broadening of human reason, by catholicity of taste and culture."⁶¹ Self-cultivation and self-understanding connected to truth and right reason contribute to the goodness in this world and living truthfully, and good restores the world's beauty.

Du Bois's assertions regarding art and politics predate the canonical figures in aesthetic theory who claim aesthetic values for their ethical and political import. For example, in Jacques Rancière's study of the merging realms of art, politics, and ethics, he asserts that the politics of aesthetics "frames new forms of individuality...it aids to help create the fabric of a common experience in which new modes of constructing common objects and new possibilities of subjective enunciation may be developed..."⁶² He goes on to write that "critical art is an art that aims to produce a new perception of the world, and therefore to create a commitment to its transformation."⁶³ These are indirect engagements with Du Bois's thought, who argued for art's role in the fight for African Americans to create and assert their subjectivities through the less restricted, but powerful, medium of art. Art, compared to politics and education, was not as heavily policed and cordoned off by the racist practices and policies of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. I argue that Du Bois's sense of art is what Rancière refers to as

61. Du Bois, "The Souls," 425.

62. Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, ed. And trans. Steve Corcoran (New York: Continuum, 2010), 142.

63. Ibid., 142.

critical art. It is art that aims to create a new perception of the world, and for Du Bois, this perception is more truthful concerning the potential of African Americans, as well as the ugliness of racial prejudice and violence. This more truthful art qua African American experiences has a transformative dimension. In other words, such art has as its aim nothing less than individual, social, and political transformation.

However, we have yet to delve more deeply into Du Bois's conception of truth. He makes use of "truth" often in his writings, although his exact meaning of it is left unformulated. He does not give an exact definition or exposition of truth as much as he highlights the moral and socio-ethical importance and function of truth. However, I comprehend two kinds of truth that he employs, one in its more objective sense and the other as subjective truth. I shall discuss objective truth first before moving on to the discussion of subjective truth. It is important to note that Du Bois closely aligns subjective truth with imagination, while objective truth deals with the search for facts and the desire to present accurate accounts.

Still, he does not completely divorce the two. In fact, they often form a working relationship in the artistic realm. In a postscript following the end of the first novel in *The Black Flame* trilogy, Du Bois reflects on objective and subjective truth. He writes that the basis of *The Ordeal of Mansart* "is documented and verifiable fact, but the book is not history."⁶⁴ *The Ordeal*, like the final two books in the trilogy, is a combination of subjective and objective truth, of point of view and verifiable fact. They are works of

64. W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Ordeal of Mansart*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 229.

historical fact and imaginative fiction designed to convey truth. In the postscript, Du Bois questions his decision to mix fiction with history, to change in certain places the order of historical events, and in short, his decision to use the imagination to tell the truth and fill in the gaps of incomplete history. He continues:

It may well be asked, and as one who has done some historical research I join in the asking, why should one tamper with history at all in order to write the truth? The answer of course is Never, if exact truth can otherwise be ascertained. But every historian is painfully aware...[of] how dependence on documents and memory leaves us all with the tale of the past half told or less. The temptation then comes to pretend we know far more than we do and to set down as accurate history that which is not demonstrably true. To me it seems wiser and fairer to interpret historical truth by the use of creative imagination, provided the method is acknowledged and clear.

He admits that objective truth is difficult to secure, but argues it should not be a neglected ideal. For Du Bois, the annals of history should be constituted by rigorous constructions of historical events and persons that can be supported by verifiable evidence, such as interviews, documents, and other concrete data. However, such accounts can be relied upon as historical if, and only if, the aim of writing history is providing an accurate chronicle of human actions and exercising reserve when information lacks sufficient verification to be considered factual. This is in contrast to historical accounts populated by biases and the desire to hide unpleasant truths.

Telling the truth was an inner and ethical compulsion for Du Bois. As he recalls in his autobiography, part of the motivation for this drive was being faced with a story that was told incomplete, and which therefore, seemed wrong or told unfairly. He does not consider subjective truth and objective truth mutually exclusive since the truth about ourselves and how we see the world is part of what informs history. At times, where

history is incomplete and fact lags behind fiction, the creative use of imagination can help fill in the gaps of history and lend coherence to the tales that represent the lives and experiences of those in the past. Du Bois does not render truth and fiction mutually exclusive or irreconcilable. He understands “the eternal paradox of history,” the challenge of excavating the past in order to provide an unclouded and total story of facts.⁶⁵ For him, history is never complete and never closed. Truth takes time and history continues to unfold even into the present as we, necessarily, revisit the past. This is an imperfect process and Du Bois similarly recognizes that historical accounts may always exist incomplete. However, the use of fiction as a supplement for absent or missing concrete data allows for an imaginative construction and reconstruction of the truth concerning obscured, incomplete, and neglected past and present events. Du Bois uses his fiction in a twofold manner: to reveal and to instruct. His fiction is an effort to reveal a more accurate picture of historical evils, while also aiming to edify readers in ways that allows them to overcome crimes of the past and improve current social and political issues. Du Bois’s view of history (as we will see from the trilogy) is that it can serve as a lesson to future generations so that past mistakes are not repeated and we can instead opt to continue on a path of progress.

By subjective truth Du Bois means one’s point of view or understanding of the world and the knowledge one has of oneself as a part of this world. Both senses of subjective truth—truth about oneself and truth about the world as one experiences it—

65. Ibid., 229.

are what Du Bois refers to in the “Criteria.” Using art as propaganda is using art to represent one’s point of view of the world in an artistic format. Art can be used to convey truth, meaning, and message. The artist is actively present in his or her work. A piece of literature might contain a character or characters reminiscent of the artist. A painting could depict a situation drawn from the artist’s life. Du Bois explicitly makes it the task of the artist to use his or her art as propaganda for truths left neglected or distorted by the propaganda of artists, scientists, government officials, and others who promote the point of view of white superiority and black inferiority. In the postscript to *Darkwater*, Du Bois asserts of the work that it is meant to be a point of view.⁶⁶

One’s point of view in the world is constituted by the experiences one has and can therefore serve as a light shining upon the dark places of society where ugliness lurks. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the experiences of blacks in the United States were parodied, misrepresented, or neglected. Art, and magazines such as the NAACP’s *Crisis*, became those spaces where authors and artists—both black and white—could expose the daily evidence of discrimination and injustice. This is the task of an apostle for truth, whether artist or not, to be one who “tells the truth and exposes evil and seeks with Beauty and for Beauty to set the world right.”⁶⁷

Du Bois always stood firm by his commitment to the seeking and telling of truth, of one’s point of view. In his 1968 autobiography, he recollects that “I told the truth

66. W.E.B. Du Bois, “Postscript,” in *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), xli.

67. Du Bois, “Criteria,” 995.

even when there was no call for the telling . . . [I] often blurted out the truth when the story was incomplete and was therefore as seemed to me wrong.”⁶⁸ However, Du Bois does issue a call for others to tell the truth through their creativity, “not for the sake of truth...but as one upon whom Truth eternally thrusts itself as the highest handmaid of imagination, as the one great vehicle of universal understanding.”⁶⁹ As such, truth along with goodness and beauty is ever positioned in the fight to set the world right.

At this juncture, it would be helpful to outline the features of Du Bois’s political aesthetic project. His political aesthetics: 1) views art as a tool for social and political transformation, as well as individual transformation; 2) formulates distinctions among art (broadly defined as that created by human beings), aesthetic nature (as one’s capacity to recognize and emotionally respond to beauty), and beauty (which encompasses goodness and right truth); 3) forms a relationship between beauty, goodness (social harmony and personal empowerment), and truth (directed toward just ends); 4) directly and necessarily engages with the lived experiences of the everyday world; 5) affirms an important relationship that can and should develop between the artist/work of art and the audience of that work, a relationship based on recognition of beauty, compassion, and empathy; and 6) understands the aesthetic in an inclusive sense, as grounded in the cognitive, emotional, and the bodily.

68. W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Autobiography of W.E.B. Du Bois: A Soliloquy on Viewing My Life from the Last Decade of its First Century*, ed. Herbert Aptheker (New York: International Publishers, 1968), 277.

69. Du Bois, “Criteria,” 1000.

Du Bois and “Of the Coming of John”

So far, I have looked at Du Bois’s works of nonfiction to flesh out the theoretical core of his political aesthetic project. Now, I will briefly examine an early work of fiction by Du Bois as an illustrative example of his political aesthetics at work through the use of art. “Of the Coming of John” will provide an additional view into his project and his use of art as propaganda.

In her article on “Of the Coming of John,” Kerry Burch makes the astute observation that Du Bois’s short story is in the *bildungsroman* genre, a coming-of-age story that “traces the remarkable educational odyssey” of its protagonist, John Jones. Burch continues that John “heroically strives to resist and transcend the American racist social order within which he lives and struggles.”⁷⁰ In his introduction to *Fateful Beauty*, Douglas Mao finds that the *bildungsroman* novel focuses on a “fictional individual’s maturation” and with the idea popularized by enlightenment aesthetics that “beauty . . . would bring human beings to some kind of reconciliation with a world that otherwise seems alien, indifferent, fragmented, or oppressive.”⁷¹ “Of the Coming of John,” and as I will show in Chapter III regarding *The Black Flame* trilogy, both share this literary framework.

“Of the Coming of John” exemplifies Du Bois’s political aesthetic project as he brings the concepts of beauty, goodness, truth, and ugliness into a fictional world that

70. Kerry Burch, “Platonic and Freirean Interpretations of W.E.B. Du Bois’s, ‘Of the Coming of John,’” *Educational Studies* 52, no. 1 (2016): 38, for both quotes.

71. Douglas Mao, *Fateful Beauty* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 6-7.

closely mirrors the real situation of race relations. Du Bois presents a world bifurcated by a veil of racial prejudice. It is a story of dual worlds, with the strivings of two men, but whose different circumstances hinder the development of each.

The town of Altamaha awaits the coming of two Johns, John Jones, who is black, and another John, the white son of the town's judge, and with whom Jones used to play as a boy. John Jones attends college, pursues a path of self-development and knowledge, and gradually becomes aware of the injustice and oppressions that surround him. As the narrator informs us, Jones "grew in body and soul . . . He had left his queer thought-world and come back to a world of motion and of men . . . He grew slowly to feel almost for the first time the Veil that lay between him and the white world."⁷² He comes to the truth of the way the world really is as he matures and leaves his world of contemplation and enters the reality of a racist social order.

In a particularly aesthetic scene, Du Bois invites readers into Jones's experience of Wagner's *Lohengrin*. The art of music is presented as a transformative aesthetic experience for Jones, and we witness the different transformations he experiences in response to the beauty of the swan's song. While in New York City, Jones follows a bustling crowd to the performance. He is absorbed by the sensory experience of the hall and the music: the "delicate beauty of the hall, the faint perfume, the moving myriad of men" and the rich clothing, which all seemed a world so apart from his that "he sat in a

72. Ibid., 525.

dreamland.”⁷³ This scene highlights Du Bois’s placement of art and beauty as powerful influences on human development. While some in the audience might have gained satisfaction and pleasure from the opera, Jones’s reaction is much deeper, suggesting he possesses an aesthetic nature that is attuned to beauty and in line with Du Bois’s merging of the aesthetic with the ethical. Jones is transported by the music, caught in an aesthetic experience that moves through him, connecting to his body, mind, and will. The swan’s song “swept through every muscle of his frame, and put it all a-tune . . . a deep longing swelled in all his heart,” then he longed to rise with the music “out of the dirt and dust of that low life that held him prisoned and befouled,” and concluding that he should not be listless or idle, “for he felt with the music the movement of power within him. If he but had some master-work, some life-service . . . bitter hard, but without the cringing and sickening servility, without the cruel hurt that hardened his heart and soul.”⁷⁴

Jones immediately responds to the music with heart and raised emotion, which, as Du Bois writes in his 1896 essay, is the measure of both a true work of art and a well-cultivated aesthetic nature. Then, John is taken into the realm of mind where he begins to further reflect on himself, his situation, and his desire to transcend the unjust social stigma of race. Lastly, the beauty of Wagner’s music awakens within him his own willpower and resolve to use goodness, find fulfilling work and be of service to others. As the final wail of the swan alights, John has a vision of his family and his home in Altamaha. He resolves to return home and teach, to fulfill a “duty to Altamaha” and

73. Ibid., 526.

74. Ibid., 526-27

perhaps to “help settle the Negro problems there.”⁷⁵ The beauty of the music facilitates Jones’s coming to consciousness of himself, his desires, and his duty to make good use of the knowledge and training he received.

Unfortunately, Jones’s enrapturing experience of beauty, and the readers’ experience of his enjoyment and awakening, are then interrupted. An usher, urged on by Jones’s boyhood friend John, who also attended the performance and whom he awkwardly encountered, relays that a mistake has been made in selling Jones a ticket. Jones and readers are hit again with the reality of racial prejudice that trespasses on beauty. This scene also reveals a larger methodology at work in Du Bois’s writings and political aesthetics: amid the beauty in this world is also the inescapability of ugliness. As noted earlier, in “Of Beauty and Death,” Du Bois pairs examples of beauty with incidents of racial prejudice to highlight this glaring contradiction. In the “Criteria,” Du Bois denounces the way in which African Americans are denied and choked off from experiences of beauty. At the editorial helm of the *Crisis*, Du Bois routinely placed articles on the artistic achievements of African Americans alongside news stories of racial violence. Russ Castronovo writes that the *Crisis*’s “transformative use” of art and its juxtaposition of the beauty that black artists can create against the ugly consequences of racism show the magazine’s mapping of “aesthetic theory onto a geography of racial difference.”⁷⁶ Du Bois was at the editorial helm, stepping “outside categories of the

75. Ibid., 528.

76. Ibid., 1448.

beautiful to consider art's uses and effects.”⁷⁷ In placing the beauty of black art and the ugliness of racial violence next to one another, Du Bois challenged the aesthetic categories traditionally neglected African American creativity and beauty. Du Bois was also exposing the ugliness of the color line and developing an aesthetic theory that took into account the everyday social world and the violence operating within it.

Soon after Jones comes home, he attends a meeting at the local black Baptist church, eager to present his ideas and plans for a school, but when he finishes speaking “a painful hush seized that crowded mass. Little had they understood of what he said, for he spoke an unknown tongue.”⁷⁸ He is unable to reach his community and leaves the church disheartened. He is followed by his sister, and as they both look out onto the sea, she asks whether knowledge makes everyone unhappy. “I am afraid it does,” Jones replies, but also asserts that he is still glad he studied and learned. Instead of the idea that knowledge brings a certain unhappiness repelling his sister, she responds “I wish I was unhappy . . . I think I am, a little, John.”⁷⁹ Paul E. Kirkland argues that here Du Bois expresses a view that “knowledge is superior to all concern for happiness” and that when Jones’s sister questions the effects of knowledge and claims to be unhappy, too, it “shows her on such a path through reflection on her sorrow, and it shows the deep yearning for the sort of knowledge that shows the nature of what is rather than that

77. Ibid.

78. Du Bois, “Of the Coming of John,” 530.

79. Ibid., 531.

which can build new worlds.”⁸⁰ This is knowledge of self and world. It is the realization of what is that must come first, and which leads to self-development, to what could be.

In the end, both Johns meet a tragic death. When Jones finds the white John attempting to rape his sister, he bludgeons John with a tree branch. However, the real tragedy in white John’s demise lies in his inability to develop alongside the markers of truth, beauty, and goodness. His point of view is blighted by an inherited racism that he allows to course through him unreasonably and unreflectively. For Du Bois, the white John, like his father, makes use of a twisted reason rather than right reason that directs humans toward good and beautiful ends. In short, John fails to add beauty and goodness to the world. Instead, he perpetuates white violence and racial prejudice, which, for Du Bois, are the ultimate barriers to human decency. John also lacked an aesthetic nature capable of responding to the beauty and flourishing of others, precisely because racial prejudice blocked his moral and aesthetic development.

Jones, by contrast, was able to cultivate his own intellectual, moral, and aesthetic development. Through his aesthetic experience of beauty, he came to the realization of his self and the world around him. He resolved to join in the fight against injustice and to attempt to transcend his oppressive conditions, though his efforts ultimately were thwarted by a racist social order that refused him recognition and reconciliation. In the final scene of the story, Jones waits to be lynched, smiling toward the sea and “softly

80. Paul E. Kirkland, “Sorrow Songs and Self-Knowledge: The Politics of Recognition and Tragedy in W.E.B. Du Bois’s *Souls of Black Folk*,” *American Political Thought* 4, no. 3 (2015): 424-25.

humming” *Lohengrin*’s “Song of the Bride” as he hears the “tramp of horses and murmur of angry men” behind him.⁸¹ Kirkland observes that in this moment, John is able to see everything in its authentic state: the longing of the transcendent contemplative self and the physical reality of life.⁸² For Kirkland, Jones is “no longer concerned with his own individuality, he recognizes the duality of life itself . . . John faces his end with joyfulness in his knowledge of life’s tragedy.”⁸³

While Kirkland makes incisive points in his article, I disagree with his interpretation of Jones’s death. Kirkland applies an avowed Schopenhauerian reading to the short story, and further, he reads the end as an end. David Levering Lewis makes the point that Du Bois thought of *Lohengrin* “as a hymn of faith, a paean to the joy of commitment,” but was unaware of the “barely sublimated anti-semitism and the nihilism of Arthur Schopenhauer.”⁸⁴

I contend, instead, that Jones’s calm acceptance of his death was not due to a joyfulness in the knowledge of life’s tragedy nor to a lack of concern with his own individuality subsumed to a “primal unity,” as Kirkland asserts.⁸⁵ Given the content of the essays in *Souls* and other essays Du Bois had written in and around the time *Souls* was published, a more plausible reading of the end is that Jones kept a faith in, and

81. Du Bois, “Of the Coming of John,” 535.

82. Kirkland, “Sorrow Songs,” 429.

83. Ibid.

84. David Levering Lewis *W.E.B. Du Bois: The Fight for Equality and the American Century, 1919-1963* (New York: Owl Books, 2001), 404-05. Kirkland is familiar with Lewis’s claim and references this work in a footnote in his article.

85. Kirkland, “Sorrow Songs,” 429.

commitment to, his own development. Although his life could be taken from him in an unjust world, the knowledge he gained and the beauty he experienced could not.

Ultimately, Jones took solace in the beauty of the sea and the music, in his own achievements amid the ugliness of racial prejudice and death. Jones's turn toward the beauty of sea and art in the end is not resignation, but rather a last stand of strength and resistance.

Kirkland is correct in reading Du Bois as privileging knowledge over happiness, a knowledge of the state of things (of self and world); however, Jones does not resign his own individuality for a primal unity. Instead, what Du Bois shows is his recognition of being a part of a greater spiritual and intellectual striving of which Jones's own strivings are an example. He is a part of the struggle to uplift oneself and one's race even if that ultimately brings unhappiness. This is evidenced in other chapters in *Souls*. In "Of Our Spiritual Strivings," for example, Du Bois writes that "this is the end of his striving: to be a co-worker in the kingdom of culture, to escape both death and isolation, to husband and use his best powers and his latent genius."⁸⁶ In other words, what Du Bois shows in the story is that the striving continues precisely because Jones is unable to escape death and isolation, and black men and women had yet to be recognized as contributors to the larger social world.

86. W.E.B. Du Bois, "Of Our Spiritual Strivings," in *W.E.B. Du Bois: Writings*, ed. Nathan Huggins (New York: Library of America, 1986), 365.

In the *Souls* chapter “Of the Training of Black Men,” Du Bois reiterates his faith in, and commitment to, education. He writes that “no secure civilization can be built in the South with the Negro as an ignorant, turbulent proletariat”; instead, he sees culture as the ultimate aim of higher training so that those cultivated individuals might prove “themselves useful to their race and generation.”⁸⁷ In “Of the Coming of John,” we witness the educative and useful effect he had on his sister, who maintained a similar commitment to knowledge in spite of the unhappiness it might bring. In Du Bois’s 1904 essay “The Development of a People,” he does not place intellectual striving above goodness. Though one’s own happiness might be secondary, the goodness (i.e., ethics) one should do with his or her knowledge is not.⁸⁸ In this essay, self-development finds its primacy as it does in Du Bois’s political aesthetics. The realization of self and world, along with continued self-development, share in an exemplification of beauty and goodness, but they do not complete them.

For Du Bois, striving was an unending process: moral, intellectual, and social striving form the backbone of the essay. At the article’s close, he writes that “the Negro . . . if he is to learn, he must learn from his group leaders, his daily companions, his social surroundings, his own dark world of striving, longing and dreaming.”⁸⁹ The realization of one’s self and the surrounding world is about seeking the truth, exposing

87. W.E.B. Du Bois, “Of the Training of Black Men,” in *W.E.B. Du Bois: Writings*, ed. Nathan Huggins (New York: Library of America, 1986), 434-35.

88. W.E.B. Du Bois, “The Development of a People,” *Ethics* 123, no. 3 (2013): 525.

89. *Ibid.*, 544.

evil, engaging in self-development, and for one's knowledge then to be put toward restoring goodness and beauty to the world.

Although we can view the conclusion of "Of the Coming of John" as an end of sorts, as an end to a work of fiction and a fictional life, I find that the story still resists closure. Instead, it remains open and unending if we consider it as more than an isolated work of fiction. The story is a part of a living struggle. It is mirror of the real world. Therefore, I do not interpret the conclusion of the story as an end in any substantial sense. Du Bois is conveying a truth of twentieth-century life for African Americans and as such, the story is a window for others to both see through and learn from. For that reason, the story also invites beginnings, beginnings and continued strivings in a fight that was not yet won. Kirkland attempted to interpret the end as the end of fictional story and to give such an ending Schopenhauerian closure. It is more faithful to read the story as representing a truth about the world in which it is always embedded, and as such, it not only resists closure, but is instead an opening.

The last point I will make regarding the conclusion of the story is the narrator's final revelation of Jones's thoughts. Jones saw that the mob was led by John's father, the judge, "whose eyes flashed with fury," and in the final lines Jones pities him, "Oh, how he pitied him,—pitied him,—and wondered if he had the coiling twisted rope."⁹⁰ In Jones's final moments, he pities the judge and presumably all men like him, whose unhappiness is not the result of knowledge, but rather the result of a stagnating, toxic

90. Ibid., 535.

mixture of ignorance and prejudice. If the three things in life that beckon the human soul are truth, beauty, and goodness, and if self-development is an aspect of all three, then one must pity the hollow lives that men like the judge lead, and the emptiness of their souls. Although Jones's life is cut tragically short, he is able to grow, mature, and gain truth and wisdom. His is a story of a man attempting to transcend the oppressive barriers and who succeeds to some degree.

Du Bois, however, also presents the ugliness and injustice that daily prevent black men and women from escaping the grips of violence and death. The judge, the white John, and other men and women consumed by racial prejudice, remain perpetually stunted in their development, unable to transcend their own cultural, social, intellectual, and willfully immoral barriers. "Of the Coming of John," is an example of Du Bois's use of art as propaganda. The story, like John Jones, are in a sense, actors in the fight for freedom and equality, and for the right to realize one's self and enjoy life. In "Of the Coming of John," Du Bois presents a point of view of the world, from his and from John's perspective. Through John's life, his struggles, and his potential, Du Bois counters racist assumptions of black inferiority, white superiority and righteousness, and the imperative to fight for the ethico-aesthetic ideals of beauty, truth, and goodness. The outline of Du Bois's political aesthetics project is revealed in his theoretical writings. However, in his works of fiction, Du Bois, as an artist, shows what art as propaganda looks like. More poignantly, he demonstrates the position of art and the artist in the fight to set the world right.

The Ethics in Aesthetics

So far, I have tried to demonstrate that early in his career, Du Bois wedded ethics with aesthetics, and in 1926, he added more explicit political dimensions to the use of art. Truth, beauty and goodness constitute the locus of his political aesthetics, while each concept unfolds in his corpus in fuller ways. Truth in its subjective sense involves the realization of self and world, while also contributing to one's self-cultivation. Truth requires the dissemination of those truths as an exercise of self-expression and freedom, while also functioning as instructive for the audience of that art. Goodness contains the above aspects of truth, while also bringing into its concept the absence of, and struggle against, race prejudice in an effort to restore justice and human unity. Beauty contains within its concepts both the definitions and functions of truth and goodness. In addition, beauty pertains to both works of art and to human beings living artfully, creatively, and freely.

The concepts are inseparable and unseparated in the lived world and form not a hierarchy, but rather a circular and inter-related, dynamic relation. In the subsequent sections of this chapter, I will introduce aesthetic and philosophical projects that have carried on the work Du Bois started more than a century ago, and for which he remains an unacknowledged figure.

The merging of aesthetics and ethics most often is traced back to Immanuel Kant, Edmund Burke, or Friedrich Schiller. The merging of art and politics often is associated with thinkers such as Theodore Adorno, Jacques Rancière, Jacques Derrida, Herbert Marcuse, Gilles Deleuze, and others. However, Du Bois has yet to be recognized as a

pioneer in the field of aesthetic inquiry as he sought to weave together the aesthetic, the social, the political, and the ethical not only for theoretical purposes, but for patently practical and everyday ends.

The theoreticians I will survey below belong to a movement that can be considered transformative aesthetics. The term *transformative aesthetics* is not the name of a purposefully cohesive movement, nor one with which most theoreticians self-identify. I will show both the reasons why such projects should be included under the moniker of transformative aesthetics, and that such projects closely parallel Du Bois's political aesthetics in important ways, such as the fusion of aesthetics and ethics, mobilizing art as a tool for social and political transformation, and seeing artistic expression as a creative and empowering process that can help the individual reclaim freedom and agency.

Du Bois's political aesthetics, as an early form of transformative aesthetics, maintains, along with the contemporary transformative aesthetics movement, that art as an expression of one's true self and world can and should be shared through a creative medium as acts of freedom and resistance, and in order to restore ideals of truth, beauty, and goodness to the world. That tripartite relation remained central to Du Bois's life and work: the good (brought about by one's will or agency), the true (one's expression of self-and-world), and the beautiful (which is both the freedom and flourishing of the first two and the creative products of that freedom flourishing).

First I would like to reiterate and supplement the definition of transformative aesthetics I provided in Chapter I in order to start out with a preliminary understanding

of the concept before moving to a fuller account of its contemporary iterations.

Transformative aesthetics projects are based on the following premises: 1) art is an educative and cultivating process and product that has the power to bring about individual, social, and political transformations; 2) art can, and should, be used for the purposes stated in the first premise; 3) art and aesthetics are fundamentally embedded within social, cultural, and political matrices, and as such, their ground extends beyond the boundaries of abstract theory and into the realm of our everyday actions and relations; 4) art as an individual and social phenomenon, and aesthetics as a fundamental ground of the everyday, endow each with both analytic and transformative potential.

Despite the inchoateness of transformative aesthetics, it has been used explicitly and implicitly (in reference to the transformative power of art) in recent scholarly circles. In an essay, Erika Fischer-Lichte asserts that in her recent 2008 book she “coined the term *transformative aesthetics* as the English equivalent for the German *Wirkungsästhetik*” and goes on to note that the term “emphasizes that aesthetics engages not just with the question of what an artwork is and how it is made, but, first and foremost, with what it *does* to the recipient.”⁹¹ In other words, Fischer-Lichte sees transformative aesthetics as having the distinct function of transforming the audience of the artwork in particular ways. She elaborates further in her book, which focuses on the art of performance, that performance is able to transform traditional borders, such

91. Erika Fischer-Lichte, “The Transformative Aesthetics of the Gesamtkunstwerk/Total Work of Art as the Specter Haunting Modernism,” *Theatre Journal* 65, no. 4 (2013): 603. Emphasis in original.

between art and life or performers and audience or people and things, into thresholds that the audience members continually cross. “The aesthetics of the performative allows for an art of passage . . . it takes up the real time of the participants’ lives and offers them the possibility to constantly bring themselves forth anew.”⁹²

Explicit mention of the term “transformative aesthetics,” however, can be found earlier than Fischer-Lichte’s use. In Christa D. Acampora and Angela L. Cotten’s 2007 edited collection of essays entitled *Unmaking Race, Remaking Soul: Transformative Aesthetics and the Practice of Freedom*, the essayists in the collection each explore a work (or works) of art and focus on the power and potential of such art to stimulate individual transformation and social-political reform.

In her introduction for the book, Acampora asserts that the major premise underlying each essay is that cultural productions, such as art broadly understood, can be used to unmake the face that marks one as female or of a particular race and/or ethnicity, and can therefore complicate and challenge the assumptions that these markers denote, such as one’s gender denoting a deficiency, or one’s ethnicity implying an inferiority.⁹³ She writes that “the aesthetic transformations of women of color are . . . often connected to lived, everyday experience, the practical realm of interests that comprise the social institutions that limit and define their possible ways of being in the world.”⁹⁴ The book

92. Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 204-05.

93. Christina Davis Acampora, “Introduction,” in *Unmaking Race, Remaking Soul: Transformative Aesthetics and the Practice of Freedom* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), 2.

94. Ibid.

centers on women of color and their attempts to reclaim freedom and agency, and their commitment to resisting socially prescribed positions in a constrictive web of political categories.

This politico-artistic imperative, however, can be applied to other groups and individuals positioned under the oppressive gaze of political categories and who strive through their art to unmake the concepts and categories that mark them as *other* and instead create their own identities and place in the world. In other words, these essayists believe art has the potential to unmake and remake the socially constructed and politically legitimated conceptual categories, such as black, Hispanic, female, working class, middle class, single mother, ex-convict, and so on, that attempt to control and divert in various ways one's movements and position in the world.

In Acampora's own essay in *Unmaking Race, Remaking Soul*, she also treats the notion of engagement, and in particular, aesthetic engagement, which she understands as potentially activating the "imaginative resources that enable the realization of agency" and that "heightens our capacity for compassion in the sense of *feeling with* others."⁹⁵ Acampora draws on the work of Toni Morrison and Simone de Beauvoir to explore the ideas of freedom and oppression. Looking at the novel *Beloved*, Acampora finds that it is "an invitation to contemplate what difference it makes in having experience (or lack thereof) of the *felt quality* of freedom."⁹⁶ Applying a Beauvoirian framework to the

95. Christa Davis Acampora, "Authorizing Desire," in *Unmaking Race, Remaking Soul* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), 73. Emphasis in original.

96. *Ibid.*, 60. Emphasis in original.

novel's themes, Acampora observes that the oppressed are reduced to mere objects, denied opportunities to transcend their "thing-ness" for the free and desired disclosure of their possibilities and pure subjectivity. She writes that the oppressed are "excluded from that community" of meaning-making and value creation, and so, "one is unable to make the movements of desire that freedom requires."⁹⁷ Acampora also asserts that the experience of slavery "generates a mutilated aesthetic,"⁹⁸ and that the enslaved or oppressed have had to subordinate their own exercise of agency and imagination to the will of those in power. They have been prohibited from bringing forth their own senses of beauty and from imbuing the world "with meanings and pleasures they participate in defining."⁹⁹

In her analysis of *Beloved*, Acampora notes the "poverty of aesthetic experience in the lives of many characters . . . being severed from a kind of desire that would enable them to creatively and imaginatively live their lives as free and full of possibilities, the characters repeatedly exhibit failure and frustration."¹⁰⁰ In the work of Fischer-Lichte, Lehner, and Acampora, transformative aesthetics involving the art and the experience of art serve important social, individual, cultural, and political functions. Echoes of Du Bois's political aesthetic project resonate in the work of these scholars as each positions art and the artist at the center of a larger push for agency, equality, unity, and social and individual transformation. Furthermore, Acampora makes a connection to Du Bois's

97. Ibid., 62.

98. Ibid., 74.

99. Ibid., 74.

100. Ibid., 76.

work by indirectly highlighting the political aesthetics ethos operating within Morrison's fiction. Through her work, Morrison draws attention to the difference between freedom in principle or by legislation, and the felt quality of freedom, as well as the genuine ability to exercise that freedom.

There are obvious parallels between "Of the Coming of John" and *Beloved*. Du Bois emphasizes the moral and practical contradictions of a post-Reconstruction era, in which the new legal freedoms of blacks were undercut and sabotaged by the persistence of racist social and economic practices. Racism among the police, government bodies, and sanctioned terror groups like the Ku Klux Klan routinely violated the freedom, safety, and uplift of African Americans. Sethe, the protagonist of *Beloved*, and Jones are both haunted by the specter of slavery, the continuing threat of violence, and the difficulty in creating beauty and meaning in a hostile world—all of which hinder their ability to give full expression to their desires, realize their full possibility, and ultimately transcend the oppressive conditions around them. This felt quality of freedom is paramount for the artistic soul to recognize and assert agency, to imaginatively project oneself into creative projects, and thus, to continue one's own development and contribute to the development of the social world. The exercise of one's imagination is to exercise and experience the feeling of one's own freedom and creative possibilities.

As we have seen, the experience of the beauty of Wagner's *Lohengrin* allowed Jones to feel and explore his own bodily and emotional responses to the music. He was able to feel his own power, project himself into the future, and imagine his own good and creative possibilities. Du Bois's theory thus illustrates what Acampora calls the

concept of *aisthesis*, which she defines as “the *feeling* of oneself as free and rich with possibilities.”¹⁰¹ It is not enough that social freedoms exist in principle, but rather it is important that an individual experiences the felt quality of his or her own freedom. Living in a world where the human soul feels the freedom to create and pursue one’s own ends is what Du Bois would call good and beautiful.

In a final and contemporary example of transformative aesthetics, I will look at Arnold Berleant, who places aesthetics firmly within the experiential realm as a tool for both revealing and changing the social world. In *Sensibility and Sense*, Berleant investigates the “powerful and pervasive presence” of the aesthetic, “how the aesthetic is incorporated in the texture of the world,” and thus recognizing the transformative possibilities of aesthetics.¹⁰² Aesthetics understood as fundamentally connected with ethics, and as having transformative possibilities, is what Berleant refers to in his book as social aesthetics.¹⁰³ Contra the aesthetic tradition of disinterested appreciation, an inward directedness, Berleant’s conception of aesthetic appreciation entails the realization that both the artistic work and the audience for the work are embedded within social and cultural matrices.

Therefore, appreciation cannot be restricted to an insulated and inward experience, but is also always, and already, outwardly directed. The artist is at least a partial reflection of the social, cultural, and global connectedness within which he or she

101. Acampora, “Authorizing Desire,” 71.

102. Arnold Berleant, *Sensibility and Sense: The Aesthetic Transformation of the Human World* (Charlottesville: Imprint Academic, 2010), 31.

103. *Ibid.*, 49.

is situated. Under a transformative aesthetic motivation, the artist is not only concerned with sharing, but also with a social and political action benefit. The artist prescribes an ethical demand through art. The reader/viewer/listener *ought* to engage with the work of art and with the artist's message. Berleant underscores the relational aspect of aesthetic experience and its ethical dimension, that is, the ability for one to remain aesthetically open to the experience of another's creation, such that one deeply feels with another. For Berleant, aesthetic engagement is the culmination of this possibility: "when it is achieved most intensely and completely, it fulfills the possibilities of aesthetic experience."¹⁰⁴ The work of art as a simultaneous ethical project requires active participation from the audience and the height of aesthetic experience occurs when "absorption in aesthetic appreciation . . . [is] so complete that the viewer, reader, or listener abandons entirely the consciousness of a separate self."¹⁰⁵ This transformative and transfiguring possibility has the potential to break down the categories of difference, to merge perspectives, and for one to at least temporarily cease being a singular and experience the world(s) of another person(s).

For Du Bois's purposes, this more open aesthetic engagement is not only possible, but it is necessary. More so, it is necessarily ethical, since the racist ideology of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries fostered a culture wherein the race of the artist posed a barrier to aesthetic appreciation and to the success and recognition of the artist.

104. Berleant, *Sensibility and Sense*, 87.

105. *Ibid.*, 87.

The contemporary world has not divested itself of racist and xenophobic discriminations or the historical stigma that attends certain social and political categories. In the “Criteria,” Du Bois writes that black artists possess within them “new stirrings; stirrings of the beginning of a new appreciation of joy, of a new desire to create, of a new will to be.”¹⁰⁶

It is no less true today than it was in Du Bois’s time that artists of all backgrounds and experiences have within them the stirring desire to create and to share their experiences with others through the medium of art. This recognition and appreciation cannot occur without an inclination to empathy and compassion. When Du Bois makes the claim that, for him, “here and now and in the world in which I work [beauty, truth, and right] are for me unseparated and inseparable,”¹⁰⁷ he is asserting the inseparableness of ethical and aesthetic nature. Du Bois’s political aesthetics and transformative aesthetics recast aesthetics within political and social imperatives. In his works of fiction, Du Bois depicts the truth of race relations and the truncated potential of black men and women to live freely and beautifully.

His works of fiction, however, do not merely depict black victimization. He also writes of deep love and romance, of reclaiming power and agency, and of the fortitude and compassion that racism fails to extinguish. Like his political aesthetics demands, Du Bois as an artist, uses his works as propaganda for truth and right. He forges an aesthetic

106. Du Bois, “Criteria of Negro Art,” 995.

107. Ibid.

theory that took close account of the social world and of the concrete instances of beauty and ugliness. By publicizing racial violence in the *Crisis* Du Bois challenged the public's ability to ignore the legal and political discriminations, as well as the extrajudicial violence against African Americans. His writings are calls to action, attempts to use the truth and art to inspire human sympathy and collective reform.

Transformative aesthetics focuses on individual development, the reclamation of agency and identity, and social and political reform. As such, Du Bois is a particularly important, though unrecognized, precursor to the movement. What I have presented is not meant to be an exhaustive list of theorists whose work qualifies as advancing a transformative aesthetics project, but rather to serve as evidence of a continuing trend that expands the boundaries of aesthetic inquiry into its ethical and socio-political significance.

More importantly, I highlighted the convergences between these projects and Du Bois's political aesthetics in order to situate Du Bois within a contemporary conversation he started more than ten decades ago. Transformative aesthetic projects position art as a tool for individual, social, and political transformation. Such projects utilize the conceptual content of goodness, truth, and beauty as a criterion for their aesthetic framework in one form or another.

CHAPTER III

POLITICAL AESTHETICS AND *THE BLACK FLAME* TRILOGY

In Chapter II, I focused on a substantial exposition of Du Bois's political aesthetics through a brief survey of his fiction and nonfiction. I introduced projects within the transformative aesthetics movement to show the important, yet unrecognized, parallels to Du Bois's own work in political aesthetics. In this chapter, I will analyze *The Black Flame* trilogy through his own aesthetic criteria of truth, goodness, and beauty. This triumvirate forms a subtle, but powerful, thematic structure firmly at work within the trilogy. These concepts each provide a different entry point with which to reconstruct a more extensive account of the ethical and political aesthetics that structures his writings and operated at its height in *The Black Flame* novels. In doing so, I will cast new light on these ideas and shed an even brighter light on these insufficiently studied novels.

My analysis begins with Du Bois's two senses of truth—subjective and objective—and then moves on to the concepts of goodness and beauty. To highlight their operation within the novels, I focus on important characters that Du Bois uses to represent and embody these criteria of art and life. Because truth, beauty, and goodness are ideals, in the novels, as in life, they cannot be reached in their fullest or purest sense. The external pressures and conditions of life are the constant admixtures that simultaneously reduce the pure attainment of an ideal, but also render its exemplification all the more profound because of the struggles and demands that life places on us.

Instead of ideals in life, Du Bois presents truth, beauty, and goodness as criteria for life. The good, beautiful, and truthful characters in the novels are not represented as idealizations, nor are they represented without faults. Rather, caught within the social and material conditions produced by a trenchant, white supremacist logic, each character struggles to exemplify, and act according to, these criteria as a form of resistance to the destructive atmosphere of race prejudice and violence. The characters struggle to preserve the meanings of truth, beauty, and goodness through their manner of everyday living. Therefore, as I show the way in which each concept is at work within the novels, I also show, as Du Bois does, the contravening conditions—the ugliness—that push against them. It is important to note here that although each concept will be discussed in separate sections, any rigid borders of discussion between them is difficult to maintain. My analysis of subjective truth through the character of Manuel Mansart, for example, will involve a discussion of goodness, as well.

Lily W. Phillips points out that the novels are a “revisiting and a recasting.”¹⁰⁸ In other words, Du Bois’s methodology involves revisiting historical events, as well as characters and situations, so that the same situations are seen from multiple viewpoints. In this revisiting of history and fictional scenes, Du Bois simultaneously recasts their meaning and importance to the characters and the readers. His recasting of history is particularly poignant as he often adds prophetic tones and sews deep chords of conspiracy into well-known events, unsettling the historical narratives we are all familiar

108. Phillips, *The Black Flame Revisited*, 158.

with and which populate history textbooks. The trilogy can be seen as a project of unsettling the narratives of history and social mythology as Du Bois uses the novels to, in a sense, unmake and remake history. This process of unmaking and remaking, as pointed out in Acampora and Cotten's *Unmaking Race, Remaking Soul*, is a method of reclaiming and reconstructing one's agency and identity outside the constraints of a society dominated by Anglo-patriarchal values and standards. As the trilogy itself seeks to unmake and remake history, it details the lives of many characters who challenge the white superiority/black inferiority mythology and struggle to remake themselves along Du Bois's criteria of truth, beauty, and goodness.

The Novels: A Brief Background

The Ordeal of Mansart (1957) is the first novel in the trilogy, which begins in the post-Reconstruction era. We are introduced to Colonel John Breckinridge, the head of the Breckinridge family and a wealthy white planter, and to his wife, Clarice Du Bignon, of a wealthy Louisianan family that is rumored to have "a touch of the 'Tar-Brush'" in its lineage.¹⁰⁹ Alongside the racial dimensions of the novel, Du Bois emphasizes the class disparities chiefly between the wealthy, Southern aristocrats and Northern business whites, and the working class whites and blacks in the South. The protagonist, Manuel Mansart, is born as his father is murdered when mistakenly thought to have kidnapped Colonel Breckinridge's wife. As the novel progresses, we witness many changes and events in Mansart's life. He marries his high school sweetheart, Susan Sanders. They

109. Ibid., 8.

have four children: Douglass, the eldest; Revels; Bruce; and one girl, Sojourner. Mansart has a violent encounter with a member of the Scroggs family—Abe Scroggs—and soon after is let go from his position at the school and sent to work in the Atlanta school system. Mansart eventually rises to the position of superintendent, much to the disappointment of his family, who would prefer to relocate to the north.

Book two, *Mansart Builds a School* (1959), opens in the year 1912 with Mansart now thirty-seven years of age and facing many difficulties as he attempts to improve the conditions of the segregated and underfunded black school system. The second novel marks an eventful period in Mansart's life, as he struggles with the death of one of his sons and the drafting of two others into the First World War. However, avoiding the monotone of tragedy, we also witness Mansart's rise to president of Georgia State College and his commitment to making it a place of safety and education for blacks. We also witness the friendships Mansart develops with two other characters in the novel, Arnold Coypel and Jean Du Bignon, who prove to be important in helping with Mansart's plans for the college.

The last novel in the trilogy, *Worlds of Color* (1961), opens in 1936, when Manuel Mansart is sixty years of age. He has lived through race riots, a world war, the Great Depression, and the New Deal—many of which the narrator tells us have shaken him “to the depths of his being.”¹¹⁰ Mansart takes a trip around the world, visiting such places as Germany, England, Russia, China, and France. When he returns to Macon, his

110. W.E.B. Du Bois, *Worlds of Color*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 1.

thoughts are fixed on beauty. He tells Jean Du Bignon that “the object of our life is or should be Beauty, having lovely things about us . . . This world was meant to be beautiful . . . And this campus is ugly.”¹¹¹ Soon after, Mansart begins work on beautifying the campus with sculptures, paintings, and greenery. However, the third novel does not escape the pattern of crises and death found in the first two. *Worlds of Color* shows the break out of the Second World War and an incident that mirrors an event in Du Bois’s own life. Jean Du Bignon is accused of being a foreign agent after attending a Peace Congress in Paris that is alleged to have communist ties. She is found innocent in a court indictment, but the controversy forces Mansart to dismiss her from the college.

The novel closes with both marriage and death in the last two chapters. Mansart and Jean eventually marry and settle into a quiet life together. In the last chapter, Mansart dies as Sojourner plays the violin over his bed. Her melody carried the “dissonant flame of protest . . . as though a storm of stars had struck across the moon and dropped on the full glory of the sun!”¹¹² Much like John Jones in “Of the Coming of John,” death is paired with the beauty and cadences of music, as if the music were a medium for the passage of a soul.

111. Ibid., 44-45.

112. Ibid., 240.

Subjective Truth

The process of realizing and communicating truth is an aspect of self-development that Du Bois is able to cultivate and show through certain characters, such as Manuel Mansart, whose journey through the first novel is his coming to a gradual, but increasing, self-awareness. He comes perceive the world around him, and later in the trilogy, to a more global awareness. His movement from a happy, yet unaware, consciousness to a troubled, yet awakened one, mirrors Du Bois's developmental structure in "Of the Coming of John." Jones "grew slowly to feel almost for the first time the Veil . . . he first noticed now the oppression that had not seemed oppression before . . . restraints and slights that in his boyhood days had gone unnoticed or been greeted with a laugh."¹¹³ Jones's and Mansart's awakening also mirrors Du Bois's, whose "life . . . took him from a happy childhood to his first intimation of the social stigma attached to a dark skin."¹¹⁴

Manuel Mansart starts out "blissfully ignorant of being a problem in the midst of problems. He was a happy little boy, living in a lovely world."¹¹⁵ As Mansart matures, he begins to take notice of the social conditions around him. His boyhood incidents with whites "awakened him to new aspects of the world."¹¹⁶ In one example, Mansart is bullied by a white schoolmate, who suddenly slaps Mansart. When the young Mansart fights back, he is violently besieged by other white children, and a white police officer

113. Du Bois, "Of the Coming of John," 525.

114. Rampersad, *The Art and Imagination*, 173.

115. Du Bois, *The Ordeal*, 77.

116. *Ibid.*, 80.

intervenes, only to allow the children to continue beating Mansart. Presumably, the officer intervenes to ensure that the white children are not hurt in the fight. This marks a turning point in Mansart's understanding of the world and sharpens his feelings about the place African Americans are forced to occupy in a racially dominated power structure. After this incident, Mansart "concluded that white folks were dangerous and unreliable people; that they hated Negroes."¹¹⁷

Both Jones and Mansart gain knowledge that awakens, embitters, and hardens them. In "Of the Coming of John" and *The Black Flame*, Du Bois presents knowledge as both gift and sacrifice. It is by seeking truth and educating oneself that a person can better understand the world and make one's place in it; yet, at the same time, such knowledge removes the blissful, or at least innocent, image of life gained in childhood. Importantly, in each story Du Bois emphasizes more than the mere gaining of truth and education. Perhaps more vital is what one does with that knowledge. The specific knowledge gained through formal studies and the truth gained from experience should be directed toward right and just ends. Jones and Mansart both resolve to devote their lives to education and to uplifting their race.

In the second novel, Mansart's awareness of the African American struggle deepens, though it is still confined primarily to their struggles in the South. It is 1919, and Mansart "realized that so far as American Negroes are concerned, progress was not

117. Ibid., 81.

what it should be.”¹¹⁸ It is in this same year that Du Bois was writing his essay “Of Beauty and Death.” When one reads the essay and novel side by side, an interesting difference is discernable between Manuel Mansart and his author. In the essay, Du Bois writes that “white America, with saving exceptions, is cruel to everything that has black blood...Fellow blacks, we must join the democracy of Europe.”¹¹⁹ Du Bois’s outlook at this point is global as he strives to create a social unity among oppressed people of color and those whites whom he sees are deeply committed to the principles of equality and democracy. It is also in this same year that Du Bois delivers a speech at, and helps to organize, the Pan-African Congress in Paris. David Levering Lewis remarks that Du Bois’s time in France allowed him to briefly live “beyond the accursed veil” and that “Europe restored his faith in humanity, whites included.”¹²⁰

By contrast, at this same time Manuel Mansart’s faith in social progress and the principles of democracy are considerably strained. Furthermore, Mansart’s interest in global events and struggles has not substantially grown or evolved into a more public activism. Even when Mansart’s concerns begin to extend to struggling groups elsewhere, such as in Africa, Russia, and China, he does not become a public figure for peace and democracy. As Du Bois highlights in the second novel, “The Pan-African Congresses in Europe in 1919 and after scarcely interested Mansart.”¹²¹ Du Bois points to Mansart’s

118. Du Bois, *Mansart Builds a School*, 48.

119. Du Bois, “Of Beauty and Death,” 117.

120. David Levering Lewis, *W.E.B. Du Bois, 1868-1919: Biography of a Race* (New York: Owl Books, 1993), 566.

121. Du Bois, *Mansart Builds a School*, 74.

lack of concern with international struggles, and instead, emphasizes the attention Mansart gives to intranational struggles, particularly those afflicting blacks in the American South.

I propose that Du Bois's decision to emphasize Mansart's attention to local, rather than international, struggles has a more substantive meaning and message, one that connects to both truth and goodness. In *The Black Flame*, Du Bois moves away from a romantic notion of the individual as the locus of attention, action, and moral heroism. In fact, what is revealed in the novels is a slight tension between singular heroism and daily, collective striving. However, this tension is not meant to force a choice between better and lesser alternatives, but rather, to present a variety of strivings and personas that each contribute something valuable both to the struggle against injustice and to one's struggle for joy and beauty in the world.

Although Mansart and Du Bois share many commonalities, Brent Hayes Edwards is correct in pointing out that Mansart cannot "be taken as an avatar for its author...Instead, there are echoes of Du Bois's experience in a wide range of characters throughout the books."¹²² Du Bois is a figure of international recognition, a noted and outspoken activist, and prolific author, who also had laudable goals aimed at improving conditions for people of color around the world. David Levering Lewis suggests that

122. Du Bois, *The Ordeal of Mansart*, xxvii.

Du Bois “comported himself as the avatar of a race whose troubled fate he was predestined to interpret and to direct.”¹²³

There are clearly important personality differences between the bold author and his modest creation, Manuel Mansart; yet, it is Mansart’s modest life and lack of public achievement that Du Bois seems to privilege in the novels. I propose that Du Bois is showing a different instantiation of goodness in Mansart, who is not driven by idealistic or grandiose aims. Mansart is driven, even at a young age and throughout the course of the novels, by goals that are more narrowly focused. Mansart is foremost concerned with the conditions blacks face in the United States, particularly in the South. He is aware of the problems and challenges African Americans face, but, as a pragmatist rather than idealist, is able to compromise his vision at times.

As readers, we come to understand that Mansart is given two possible paths in life, and we are given two different ways to interpret him. At the start of the first novel, Mansart’s birth scene indicates both a biblical destiny and the ordinary struggles of life. Mansart’s grandmother helps to deliver him, anointing the newborn with his father’s blood, then “the sibyl,” as the narrator refers to her, enters Emmanuel Church “naked from neck to loin.”¹²⁴ Interrupting a singing bishop, she yells “Behold the Black Flame! . . . His name is Manuel . . . He is Called!”¹²⁵ Mansart’s birth is shrouded in divine references and an apparent destiny for greatness. Mansart, as a potential “avatar”

123. David Levering Lewis, *W.E.B. Du Bois: The Fight for Equality and the American Century, 1919-1963* (New York: Owl Books, 2000), 2.

124. *Ibid.*, 46.

125. *Ibid.*, 46.

or savior, has been called forth to light the way for his race. In his introduction to the first novel, Brent Hayes Edwards makes the point that the birth scene and the grandmother's words could have been a biblical reference to Isaiah 7:14: "Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel." However, as Edwards continues:

"Manuel Mansart is by no means a savior. He pursues his modest work in education and never achieves any sort of regional or national leadership role... The contraction of the name, then, might be taken to emphasize that divine salvation or transcendence is impossible in human affairs: the only solution is laborious, plodding, 'manual' work (in a deliberate pun, since the son is born not to carry out some holy project, but instead to pursue 'man's art')."¹²⁶

Rampersad and Keith E. Byerman also touch on this interpretation of the name "Mansart" (though Edwards, Rampersad, and Byerman do not give this allusion the more careful treatment it warrants), as well as how this can be brought to bear on Du Bois's conception of goodness.¹²⁷

If we briefly revisit Du Bois's conception of goodness, these incongruences take on a particular significance. Du Bois understands goodness as that "simple human decency"¹²⁸ and that "life is the fullest, most complete enjoyment of the possibilities of

126. Brent Hayes Edwards, introduction to *The Ordeal of Mansart*, by W.E.B. Du Bois (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), xxx.

127. See Rampersad p. 276 in *The Art and Imagination of W.E.B. Du Bois and Byerman* p. 157 in *Seizing the Word*.

128. Du Bois, *Darkwater*, 117.

human existence. It is the development and broadening of the feelings and emotions . . . Freedom is the path of art, and living in the fuller and broader sense of the term is the expression of art.”¹²⁹ Has Mansart, by the end of the novels, lived an artful life, one of freedom and the fullest expression of his possibilities? Which path does Mansart take: savior or ordinary manual laborer?

As I asserted above, Du Bois is not presenting these as better and lesser alternatives, but rather, as different modes of living or orienting oneself to the world. Mansart chooses the pragmatic life, and like the Saint Orgne of Du Bois’s essay, he looks “full at life as it is and not as it might be or haply as he would have it.”¹³⁰ Mansart’s life is no less beautiful or good because he lives a modest life of humble strivings, nor because he diverged from his path as a potential savior. As Edwards points out, we can take Du Bois to be emphasizing that divine salvation and the expression of transcendent ideals and possibilities are not attainable in the ordinary realm of human affairs.¹³¹ Expressions of truth, beauty, and goodness must contend with and navigate the strictures of social conditions.

In some of his writings, Du Bois analogized himself and certain of his characters to biblical and mystical figures. For example, Edward J. Blum finds that Saint Orgne reveals “Du Bois’s continuing sense of autobiographical prophet-hood...in the guise of

129. W.E.B. Du Bois, “The Revelation of Saint Orgne the Damned,” in *W.E.B. Du Bois: Writings*, ed. Nathan Huggins (New York: Library of America, 1986), 1060-061.

130. *Ibid.*, 1048.

131. Edwards, introduction, xxx.

Saint Orgne.”¹³² Jim Davis, the protagonist of “The Comet,” is seen by a white female character as “glorified . . . Son of God and great All-Father of the race to be.”¹³³

However, Rampersad observes that in the last phase of Du Bois’s life and writings, “he strove to erase from his writing the confabulation of the self, the deliberate design of the ego as hero.”¹³⁴

Thus, in *The Black Flame* we see the humble Mansart as a new and different kind of hero, a quasi-hero of the ordinary, who is not the center of the saga, but rather serves as one among many strivings in the novels. The ego and the hero are recast in anti-centric and modest ways. Heroism, like Du Bois’s leitmotif of the flame, burns in different degrees and intensities in each person. Mansart realizes this at the end of the first novel when he tells his family that his old teacher, Miss Freiburg, “burned low, tense and green white,” while James Burghardt, a particularly obvious echo of Du Bois in the novels, “was crimson flame disciplined by his thought.”¹³⁵ Mansart concludes with an explanation of his own epithet. “I am the Black Flame,” he says, “but I burn for cleaning, not destroying. Therefore, I burn slow.”¹³⁶ Mansart does not seek prophet-hood or imagine himself a savior. He accomplishes what modest good he can in a world that hinders blacks from reaching their full potential. The beauty and goodness of Mansart’s life is mitigated by racial prejudice. He embodies beauty and goodness and contributes

132. Edward J. Blum, *W.E.B. Du Bois: American Prophet*, Politics and Culture in Modern America (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 42.

133. W.E.B. Du Bois, “The Comet,” in *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 131.

134. Rampersad, *The Art and Imagination*, 263.

135. Du Bois, *The Ordeal of Mansart*, 228.

136. *Ibid.*, 228.

beauty and goodness to the social world, though their fullness is unavoidably attenuated and influenced by historical and material conditions.

Transcendent ideals and their fullest expression are not possible in the world of human affairs and their breadth and depth are particularly hindered by the ugliness of race prejudice. Christopher Powers points out that in “Of the Coming of John,” and this is no less true of *The Black Flame*, Du Bois reveals the “incommensurability of ‘realms’ . . . [and] the incommensurability of ideals and history . . . of opportunity and realization.”¹³⁷ The transcendent realm of ideals is not realizable in the realm of human affairs. However, we see through Mansart that attenuated forms of goodness and beauty are realizable and do not signify an end, but rather constant beginnings in a history and struggle that is never closed. Both remain open, in motion, and perpetually live on in the future generations that must continue in the fight.

Rampersad suggests that the novels are not merely a space for Du Bois to re-present his ideas. The trilogy is “a final *revaluation* of his perception of a nation and its history, of his own attitudes and philosophy.”¹³⁸ Therefore, readers are not simply getting an aggregation of the thinker’s past ideas reasserted in the novels. Instead, readers are sharing in the author’s reconsiderations of those truths, his ultimate valuation of them, and the new perspective that emerges. Like Du Bois, who revisits and revalues his own ideas and philosophy “in light of new experiences,”¹³⁹ Manuel Mansart revises

137. Christopher Powers, “Figurations of Passage in ‘Of the Coming of John,’” *CR: The New Centennial Review* 15, no. 2 (2015): 63-4.

138. *Ibid.*, 266. Emphasis added.

139. *Ibid.*, 266.

his in light of the new people and situations he encounters. In abandoning the ego as hero, the individual as the locus of action and change, and in presenting the modest life of Mansart as one of beauty and goodness among many other lives, Du Bois has come to terms with the incommensurability of transcendent ideals and the finitude of life.

The trilogy is a presentation and exploration of different possibilities for life, different ways of living, and the potential consequences of the decisions one makes. In short, the trilogy presents readers with many diverse points of view of the world. For this reason, the novels defy being read as coming to any absolutist conclusions regarding the fate of race relations, the progress of social justice, and the potential of political movements, such as communism, to change the conditions for African Americans in the United States. Instead, the trilogy repeatedly points to incompleteness, ambiguity, and open-endedness. For example, the lives of the characters in the novels are presented to readers with missing spans of time as one character is left behind and other characters and events are visited and revisited, so that readers are given an incomplete picture of the lives of the characters.

Similarly, the fates of certain characters are left ambiguous and open-ended when the narrative fails to return to their plot line to give readers updates on the characters' status within the story. In another example, the ending of the last novel in the trilogy, *Worlds of Color*, reinforces the claim that the novels resist resting on any absolutist conclusions. Before Mansart's death, he has two dream visions about the fate of the world: one, apocalyptic and another, idyllic. In the apocalyptic dream, Mansart shrieks that he has seen "bombs filling the skies" and hears "the scream of Death...Moscow was

aflame, London was ashes, Paris was a clot of blood, New York sank into the sea. The world was sorrow, hate and fear—no hope.”¹⁴⁰ He then screams for his children to save him, and for them to save the world.¹⁴¹ Mansart’s second vision is of peace and hope. He sees “the golden domes of Moscow shining on Russia’s millions, yesterday unlettered, now reading the wisdom of the world . . . birds singing in Korea, Viet-Nam, Indonesia and Malaya . . . India and Pakistan united, free; in Paris, Ho Chi Minh celebrated peace on earth.”¹⁴²

In this final scene, readers are provided with two possible paths for the world: one violent and the other, beautiful. It is interesting to note that Mansart dreams of peace and beauty coming to those nations that were either embracing communism at the time or had the potential to be influenced by the communism of Russia and China. What comes out in the trilogy is precisely what Kate A. Baldwin points to as being lost when scholars focus solely on the early writings by Du Bois. In Baldwin’s comprehensive work *Beyond the Color Line and the Iron Curtain*, she studies the influence of communism on the work of African American intellectuals. She notes Du Bois’s move away from liberalism and “toward communism and a personal alliance with the Soviet Union.”¹⁴³ Baldwin also notes that in Du Bois’s later work “he repeatedly reminds his readers that one can never predict the future . . . At the same time, he stresses the importance of acknowledging hope, aspiration, and the utopian impulse toward new

140. W.E.B. Du Bois, *Worlds of Color* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 239.

141. *Ibid.*, 239.

142. *Ibid.*, 240.

143. Kate A. Baldwin, *Beyond the Color Line and the Iron Curtain: Reading Encounters between Black and Red, 1922-1936* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 125, 128.

modes of being.”¹⁴⁴ Through the novel’s final scene, Du Bois leaves the future undetermined, unresolved, and merely points to a possible path for peace. Baldwin is correct in highlighting Du Bois’s simultaneous impulse toward a hopeful and peaceful future and his awareness that the future is never determined or certain, regardless of the apparent potential a political movement such as communism might have. Mansart’s dual vision of a future not yet determined underscores his own uneasiness about leaving a world in which his children still live, a world that is still mired in conflict and struggle. Yet, Mansart does have a dream of beauty and hope. He imparts both dreams onto his children before he dies.

When Mansart passes, he is surrounded by loved ones. His wife, children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren are at his bedside. In one important moment before his death, Mansart kisses his young, great-granddaughter and whispers to her, “Can you tell me, dear little one, what the world will be which you will see before you die?”¹⁴⁵ Amid the scene of Mansart’s death, we also become keenly aware of the future. That is, the novel stresses the presence of successive generations alongside the fading Mansart. The remaining members of the Mansart family symbolize potential and hope. Du Bois conjures visions of a noble burial and a vision as hopeful and lofty as that which surrounded Mansart’s birth. “Over his body lay a pall of crimson roses, such as few kings have ever slept beneath.”¹⁴⁶ *The Black Flame* shows Du Bois’s (and Mansart’s)

144. Ibid., 132.

145. Du Bois, *Worlds of Color*, 239.

146. Ibid., 240.

understanding of the way in which persons and events interrelate and connect, and the way in which the individual is always a part of a larger, continuing struggle. Some of Du Bois's concluding words in *The Autobiography* could serve equally well as a eulogy for Mansart:

Your thoughts, your deeds, above all your dreams still live...For this is a beautiful world; this is a wonderful America, which the founding fathers dreamed until their sons drowned it in the blood of slavery and devoured it in greed. Our children must rebuild it...Teach us, Forever Dead, there is no Dream but Deed, there is no Deed but Memory.¹⁴⁷

Du Bois places his hope in future generations who will continue to struggle for truth, goodness, and beauty and who will continue to push for social and political change.

To return to Edwards' last point: the protagonist's name. Manuel alludes to the "laborious, plodding, 'manual' work," and rather than a "holy project" Mansart is "to pursue man's art." What, then, is "Man's art"? "Man's art" is simply what Mansart does: experience life day to day, but with the caveat that one must live according to truth, beauty, and goodness. This triumvirate, as we have already seen, is what for Du Bois constitutes a life worth living.

As Paul C. Taylor observes, Du Bois remained a self-realization ethicist, and in his recent book, Taylor adds to this picture of Du Bois the influence of expressivism. In

147. Du Bois, *The Autobiography*, 422-23.

other words, though certain “internal ‘plans’ and external conditions” may be determinate, it is still within the individual’s control to create him or herself as a particular expression or subject of such conditions.¹⁴⁸ Truth, beauty, and goodness can, and should, act as conditions, as inner and outer compulsions, that help shape the individual and the individual’s life. Du Bois asserts that “the freedom to love without limit; the freedom to dream of the utter marriage of beauty and art; all this men may have,” but only if they are “sufficiently well-bred to make human contact bearable . . . if they have character enough to distinguish between right and wrong.”¹⁴⁹ Therefore, a good and beautiful life must be deserved and earned. This requires physical, emotional, intellectual, and moral labor. Du Bois continues that art is “experience of life, [it] increases and grows, the more widely it is shared.” In other words, it is by sharing our lives with others and embracing human fellowship that our own experience of life can grow. “Man’s art” then—or rather, human art—is both experiencing life and sharing the goodness, beauty, and truth of life with others.

Objective Truth

In *The Black Flame*, Du Bois uses imagination to restore and revise history so that it approximates a more complete and truthful account of events, as well as the more hidden political, social, and economic forces behind those events. Lily W. Phillips

148. Paul C. Taylor, *Black is Beautiful: A Philosophy of Black Aesthetics* (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016), 91-2.

149. Du Bois, “The Revelation,” 1062. Du Bois’s notion and use of “sufficiently well-bred” calls to mind the charges of elitism and his privileging of Western education. David Levering Lewis addresses these points in *W.E.B. Du Bois: The Fight for Equality and the American Century, 1919-1963* (New York: Owl Books, 2001).

suggests that the prophetic and conspiratorial content of the trilogy is meant to warn readers of the truth as Du Bois had come to see it. Characters, such as Dr. Baldwin, try to warn against violence and debauchery. Dr. Baldwin's warnings are rejected by the public and he is thought insane, though ultimately proven right as the United States descends into the First World War. Phillips continues that "the presentation of these truth tellers as rejected may indicate Du Bois's feelings about his own place in the American cultural landscape" and suggests a "bleak prognosis for the country unless Americans use their agency to make the changes he advocates."¹⁵⁰

Toward the end of his life, Du Bois became a marginalized figure whose outspokenness and involvement with international movements, especially communism, culminates in a self-imposed exile to Ghana; difficulty in getting his trilogy published by mainstream outlets; and what amounts to rejection or neglect by much of the American public. *The Black Flame* is one of his last attempts to convey his perspective and what he believes is a more accurate picture of historical events to the world. In the postscript, Du Bois acknowledges the difficulty in writing history and presenting an unbiased, objective account. He embraces and uses the imaginative registers of fiction to excavate the deeper truths that lie beneath the surface of history.

Phillips makes the point that the trilogy is full of crises because Du Bois "regarded crisis as that which allows one to see clearly . . . a crisis at the surface can

150. Phillips, "The Black Flame Revisited," 164.

break the illusion and allow us to see the underlying history.”¹⁵¹ By revising Franklin Roosevelt’s death from natural causes into a conspiratorial crisis, Du Bois tries to reveal the active forces beneath the surface of history that sought to reverse the direction of Roosevelt’s more socialistic policies. In *Mansart Builds a School*, Du Bois writes that American corporate finance and “an ever-growing network of powerful banks . . . hated Franklin Roosevelt with perfect hatred . . . These insane seekers for power swore by earth, heaven and hell to kill the God-damned meddler.”¹⁵²

After the novel records one failed attempt to assassinate Roosevelt, the narrator’s relation of certain details hints at assassination, rather than a cerebral hemorrhage, as the real cause of Roosevelt’s death. The narrator warns us that “there were men who growled: ‘He’ll die at Warm Springs yet.’”¹⁵³ The narrator also produces a witness who saw a group of whites gathering in the darkness one night and discussing the assassination plot. The witness, a black man, tries to warn others, but is not believed, much like Dr. Baldwin. There are several figures, some prophetic and others not, who try to issue warnings that only meet with incredulity and condescension. Du Bois seems to suggest that it is because of one’s unwillingness to believe and seek the truth that destruction and death ultimately result.

Phillips also notes that the trilogy employs “several different kinds of knowledge—factual, experiential, and imaginative,” and that for Du Bois, each of these

151. Ibid. 164-65.

152. Du Bois, *Mansart Builds a School*, 142.

153. Ibid., 143.

has “value and truth . . . as he had been blurring the boundaries between them throughout his career.”¹⁵⁴ These different kinds of knowledge are closely and animatingly at work within the novels as carriers of truth. By using these different forms Du Bois is able to meet the usual clouding of historical facts that he warned of in the postscript to the first novel, and in his 1935 book, *Black Reconstruction in America*.

The chapter entitled “The Propaganda of History” outlines Du Bois’s worries concerning the biases that infiltrate and distort historical accounts. He asserts that the problem with historical accounts and the process of writing them is that most are (mis)guided by the belief that “evil must be forgotten, distorted, skimmed over... That history loses its value as an incentive and example; it paints perfect men and noble nations, but it does not tell the truth.”¹⁵⁵ For Du Bois, the trilogy acts as a corrective to the one-sided biases that neglect or gloss over people of color and racist events in an effort to present a sanitized version of history, and one that is often more palatable to whites. Du Bois uses the trilogy to re-historicize a past that is often presented incompletely. Baldwin comments on Du Bois’s tendency to use a “patchworking of diverse genres and disciplines” in his writings, when for example, he combines history, sociology, fiction, and autobiographical elements.¹⁵⁶ She notes his “refusal to be satisfied with one mode of historicizing” and that “he believed in the fallibility and unpredictability of any attempt to narrate the past, and emphasized the inevitability of

154. Philips, “The Black Flame Revisited,” 167.

155. W.E.B. Du Bois, “The Propaganda of History,” in *W.E.B. Du Bois: Writings*, ed. Nathan Huggins (New York: Library of America, 1986), 1040.

156. Baldwin, *Beyond the Color Line*, 133.

misrepresentation.”¹⁵⁷ As we see from his postscript, Du Bois is candid about his methodology, his changing of facts, and his use of fiction. Therefore, any misrepresentation of facts is done with full disclosure and transparency.

Furthermore, for Du Bois, this methodology serves the purposes of approximating a deeper, objective truth regarding U.S. history and a wider global history in which the United States played an active and oppressive part. Rampersad asserts that *The Black Flame* allows us to see history “from the dark underside of America.”¹⁵⁸ The trilogy is Du Bois’s way of correcting the misguided belief that history must occlude the evils of past deeds in order to present a more noble (though false) history. Baldwin theorizes that Du Bois’s autobiographies bear “witness to a ‘mass of memories’ that may open up a new relationship to the past.”¹⁵⁹ Although Baldwin is referencing his autobiographical works, her point serves equally well for the trilogy. By infusing the trilogy with both historical facts and fiction, Du Bois is opening readers up to a new and alternative relationship to the past.

Goodness

Arnold Coypel represents a figure of goodness and truth in the novels. He is introduced in the second book of the trilogy as a white North Carolinian working in the local school system. Eventually, a friendship with mutual respect develops between him and Mansart as they both work toward improving the black school system in Atlanta.

157. Ibid., 128-29, 133.

158. Rampersad, *The Art and Imagination*, 275.

159. Baldwin, *Beyond the Color Line*, 141.

Both men are modest, with humble ambitions, well read, and dedicated to education.

Coypel is concerned with “development, social uplift, new forms of living . . . He would like to be part of some movement or movements toward wider realization of what human life might mean,” as the narrator informs us.¹⁶⁰

In addition to representing goodness, Coypel is shown as a person concerned with deeper philosophical and social truths. When Mansart informs Coypel of the inferior conditions of the black school system in Atlanta, Coypel visits those schools and is horrified. He responds to the truth with acceptance rather than rejection or neglect, unlike other white characters in the novels. Coypel’s recognition of the truth allows him and Mansart to embark on a constructive project together, working to improve the school system for blacks in Atlanta, and later, building a college for African Americans in Macon. Coypel, like Mansart (and Du Bois), believes in the importance of self-development and social progress.

Before meeting Manuel, Coypel was working to improve the educational situation for blacks in his hometown of Lanarka, North Carolina. There, he made the community more “education conscious,” beautified the local white school, and arranged for a new school for the African Americans in the community.¹⁶¹ After Coypel takes the job of superintendent of the city schools in Atlanta, he has his first meeting with Mansart, the superintendent of the school system for blacks in Atlanta. The narrator describes their meeting as a “communion of souls . . . Coypel was quite different from

160. Du Bois, *Mansart Builds a School*, 5.

161. *Ibid.*, 4-5.

the type of white school official with whom Mansart had hitherto come in contact. He felt sympathy with him.”¹⁶² Coypel helps Mansart rise to the deserved position of president of the black schools in Atlanta, and eventually, helps Mansart with his plans for a new state college for African Americans.

Jean Du Bignon is another figure of goodness and truth in the novels. She experiences her own awakenings to the significance society attaches to skin color and race. As the narrator informs us, Jean had never “dreamed how vital ‘color’ was in American life. She found herself compelled to face everything from studied neglect to actual violence.”¹⁶³ Much like the trilogy itself, Jean sought to expose the way the United States placed such an intractable and unjust value (or devaluation) on race. Jean and Mansart, as well as other characters, quickly and roughly come to this realization throughout the novels. Although Jean looks more white than African American, it is her black ancestry that she most identifies with and celebrates. Jean often faces scorn from whites when she proudly reveals her black heritage, and at times, she faces resentment and suspicion from blacks when she reveals the same. Jean earns her doctorate in sociology in order to “study the races of the world and their relations.”¹⁶⁴ Though Jean wants to teach, she accepts a position as Mansart’s secretary at the recently built Georgia State College in Macon. She quickly proves to be indispensable to Mansart in the day to day administrative duties. Jean also poses a surprisingly formidable force against the

162. Ibid. 10-11.

163. Ibid., 82.

164. Du Bois, *Mansart Builds a School*, 83.

entitled white business men who often insist on seeing President Mansart without an appointment. After Jean's ingenious interventions, such as installing a lock on Mansart's door that she can control, Mansart's more hostile white visitors no longer could barge into his office, and are forced to wait before seeing him. Having spent much of her life caught between two different worlds, yet not belonging completely to either, her work with Mansart gives her a sense of purpose and belonging.

There are obvious parallels between Jean Du Bignon and W.E.B. Du Bois. Jean is bold and defiant in the face of race prejudice. She has a commanding and tireless work ethic and shows a love and enthusiasm for teaching. In writing a trilogy centering on the interrelationship among the characters, Du Bois is emphasizing the cooperative and communal over the ego's struggle and the individual's responsibility. The goodness of human fellowship amid a common cause can help press forward the ability of others and future generations to live in a world where human potential is not circumscribed by oppressive social conditions. Jean, Coypel, and Mansart each contribute to the success of the Georgia State College, which becomes a place where, as Mansart finds, blacks are "safe; no white man dared to invade this sanctuary and swagger and kick . . . Here was sanctuary from the white mob."¹⁶⁵ It is in this sanctuary that students find a place to gain knowledge, excel in their studies, form friendships with other students and teachers, and perhaps enter the world in a better position to succeed within it. The Georgia State College becomes a "seat of power" for Mansart, where he "at last...escaped the

165. Ibid., 102.

recurrent threat of the mob,” and as the president, “ruled over a physical kingdom.”¹⁶⁶

The college itself represents the triumvirate of Du Bois’s political aesthetics. It is a space where truth, beauty, and goodness can flourish without the constant threat of violence and race prejudice.

Beauty

Relative to other members of the Mansart family, and other characters in the novel, fewer pages and less attention are given to Sojourner Mansart. Her birth takes place in the second novel, and she is introduced in the seemingly unfavorably named chapter, “The Homely Black Girl,” yet she is one of the most important personas to focus on for the concept of spiritual beauty. Although quantitatively she does not figure into a large part of the trilogy, Du Bois nevertheless imbues her character with qualitative significance. What readers eventually realize is the subtle irony Du Bois injects into the title of that chapter where we are first introduced to Sojourner.

This irony is not without precedent in Du Bois’s oeuvre. In “Of the Meaning of Progress,” the title indicates that readers will be shown what the meaning of progress is. However, as the narrative unfolds it simultaneously critiques and dismantles the meaning of progress in the United States in the early twentieth century. Similarly, through Sojourner’s story line, the concept of beauty qua its predication on whiteness (and approximating lighter skin tones) is dismantled and critiqued. Sojourner emerges as one of the most beautiful characters in the trilogy because she has a beautiful soul that

166. Ibid., 101-02.

she develops through strength of spirit, depth of emotion, and a natural talent for music. The narrator tells us that Sojourner was “not a pretty child, but thought herself much worse looking than she was . . . Even her features were not really unpleasing, but exaggerated in a racial type which the world about her despised and ridiculed.”¹⁶⁷

In other areas of the trilogy, Du Bois deliberately highlights the stigma that whites and blacks attach to dark skin color. In *Worlds of Color*, for example, Douglass Mansart’s son, Adelbert, decides to attend Georgia State College. The reason, in part, is to break free from his family. Mansart finds out that, unlike Adelbert’s sister, who is light-skinned, Adelbert “was disliked and almost disinherited in his mother’s affections because his skin was dark.”¹⁶⁸ Similarly, as the narrator tell us, Sojourner “was what men would call black and ugly; that is, dark seal brown” and that she loved to read romantic fiction, but had stopped because the women in it were all “‘beautiful:’ ‘beautiful’ flowing hair, ‘beautiful’ white skin . . . She had none of these. She did not long for them . . . but she was hurt and turned back in upon herself because there seemed no place for her in the world.”¹⁶⁹

The world around Sojourner declares beauty an inherent attribute of whites, while either explicitly denying beauty to blacks or tacitly confirming an incompatibility between the two. Sojourner eventually marries Roosevelt Wilson, who lived with the Mansarts for much of his childhood. Wilson does not think Sojourner is physically

167. Ibid., 170.

168. Du Bois, *Worlds of Color*, 145.

169. Du Bois, *Mansart Builds a School*, 176-77.

beautiful at first, and is instead drawn to the way she performs black spirituals on her violin. To Roosevelt, she is “a very real, unselfish and beautiful soul.”¹⁷⁰ Roosevelt is not a romantic, and is unconcerned with the idealistic notion of love. Instead, he is largely driven by pragmatic concerns. His reasons for courting and then marrying Sojourner, at least in part, are because she “would make few demands upon him” and “protect him from other women”; and “she was the child of the powerful president of the Colored State College,” and so Roosevelt asks himself, “why not marry this girl?”¹⁷¹

It is mentioned frequently in the second novel that Sojourner is overlooked by others and often forgotten by her own family. She is shy and quiet, but in her music she finds strength, presence, and a true expression of herself. The music transforms her, and her command of it is able to transform and transport her audience. As discussed in Chapter II, Fischer-Lichte believes that performance in the arts allows thresholds to be crossed, and for audience members to continually bring themselves forth anew in the process. The *Lohengrin* scene in “Of the Coming of John” essentially describes this process as Jones goes through several transformations in response to the music. The beautiful tones and cadences of the swan song flow through Jones and cause him to reflect on himself, what he wants, and what he should do with his life and knowledge. He feels his power and worth through the music. Similarly, for Sojourner, music is an ecstasy and “world of sound [where] there was no evil or terror, only communion of

170. Ibid., 176.

171. Ibid., 176-77.

souls in common dreams.”¹⁷² Du Bois maintained throughout his career the importance of the arts to black life, particularly the spirituals as a source of unity, cultural value, expression, and freedom.

An important insight into how Du Bois’s political aesthetics had changed and matured at the time of *The Black Flame* occurs in a scene between Sojourner and Roosevelt. There is an important clarification Du Bois adds to his notion of beauty that in “The Art and Art Galleries of Modern Europe,” “Of Beauty and Death” and “The Criteria of Negro Art” still remained vague and perhaps overly inclusive. For example, in each of these three pieces Du Bois gives specific examples of beauty—works of art, natural scenes, city vistas—yet, he also includes a socially harmonious vision of the world as beautiful and asserts that beauty’s “variety is infinite, its possibility is endless.”¹⁷³ In “The Art and Art Galleries of Modern Europe,” Du Bois writes that beauty is in proportion to the emotions it raises.¹⁷⁴ In “Of Beauty and Death,” he finds that “beauty is fulfillment. It satisfies.”¹⁷⁵ Du Bois does not abandon these descriptions of beauty, but through Roosevelt Wilson, he gives us a clarification that is at the same time a warning concerning beauty. When Roosevelt confesses to Sojourner his desire to marry her, he realizes at that point that he does truly love her. However, Sojourner is convinced she is not worthy of love since she lacks the beautiful features of white women.

172. Ibid., 177.

173. Du Bois, “The Criteria of Negro Art,” 995.

174. Du Bois, “The Art and Art Galleries of Modern Europe,” 35.

175. Du Bois, “Of Beauty and Death,” 120.

Roosevelt replies,

most human beings...are not particularly pretty. And the beautiful are not always the good or even the useful. We have a silly habit of painting everything which is good and true as 'beautiful.' What we mean, of course, is that it is wholesome and satisfying and fulfilling. All that you are.¹⁷⁶

Du Bois is both challenging the unfair stigma of blackness and the racist synonymy of beauty with whiteness. At the same time, he is revisiting his own conceptions of beauty. Roosevelt's comment serves as a warning that in one's estimations of the interconnectedness of beauty, truth, and goodness there is also the risk of conflating them or attributing the triumvirate to a person or thing when in truth one or more elements might be absent. An externally beautiful person might not be a good or just person.

Roosevelt's conclusion contrasts Du Bois's well-known assertion in "The Criteria of Negro Art" "that somehow, somewhere eternal and perfect Beauty sits above Truth and Right I can conceive, but here and now and in the world in which I work they are for me unseparated and inseparable."¹⁷⁷ This could be taken to imply that in this world if one of the elements in his triumvirate is present, then the other two must be present as well. In other words, if something is good and true, then it is also beautiful. However, Wilson's words critique this idea as a "silly habit." One might rightly ask, "Why assume Du Bois is putting his own belief in the words of Wilson?" First, there are

176. Du Bois, *Mansart Builds a School*, 178.

177. Du Bois, "The Criteria," 995.

important similarities between Wilson and Du Bois that should not be ignored. Second, Du Bois is using the space of the trilogy to revisit, revalue, and revise his earlier thought, as well as perceptibly putting echoes of himself into the characters. Lastly, even if we do not grant that Wilson is uttering Du Bois's own belief here, Wilson's remarks are still directly engaging with previous assertions made by Du Bois. As such, their significance must be brought to bear on the author's philosophy.

Let us briefly consider a substantive similarity between the two men. When discussing "Of the Coming of John," Powers notes a central conflict that Du Bois constructed the story around: that of the incommensurability of the finite realm of human affairs and the eternal, transcendent realm, and, relatedly, the incommensurability between ideals of opportunity and the reality of their realization.¹⁷⁸ Powers' observation connects to a similar observation Rampersad makes regarding a central conflict in Du Bois's own life. Rampersad writes that Du Bois felt the conflicting desires between "spiritual conviction and . . . secular power . . . between the role of scientist and that of poet-moralist."¹⁷⁹ The poet-moralist and the spiritualist engage with the ideal and transcendent, while the secularist and the scientist prefer observable and concrete evidence. Roosevelt Wilson embodies these same conflicts in the novels as Du Bois portrays him as a man devoted to concrete changes and pragmatic social concerns, while also being a man of religion. Wilson went into the ministry because "the Negro church

178. Powers, "Figurations of Passage," 63-4.

179. Rampersad, *The Art and Imagination*, 174.

was the most powerful organization” among African Americans and “it represented the people . . . it escaped more than any other social institution the influence and domination of the whites.”¹⁸⁰

Wilson’s belief in religion was natural, as he grew up with religion, but “his belief was vague and not particularly important to him . . . there was a lot of social work that could be done in the church that was not well done” such as charity, education for the children, and getting employment for church members.¹⁸¹ Wilson occupies a more pragmatic line between the spiritual and the secular. His focus is on racial uplift more than proselytizing religion. To Wilson it was obvious that “God ruled” and “he sacrificed his son for the people,” but at the same time, “there were the hard real things of earth and time.”¹⁸² Roosevelt, like Du Bois, is also devoted to the power of reason and education. He believes whites can “be beaten with brains and hard work . . . He proposed to win recognition by thought and effort.”¹⁸³ Du Bois’s figuration of Wilson, similar to his figuration of John Jones, is a character that struggles to reconcile the spiritual with the finite and to reconcile his ideals for the world with their ultimate realization.

How, then, do Wilson’s assertions revise Du Bois’s much earlier pronouncements regarding beauty? There are two possibilities, one weak and one strong, let us say. The weak interpretation is that Du Bois is merely presenting, through Roosevelt, an alternative to his own conception of beauty without endorsing it; that he is

180. Ibid. 173.

181. Ibid., 173.

182. Ibid., 173, 180.

183. Du Bois, *Mansart Builds a School*, 173.

presenting the readers with choices. As Phillips has claimed, Du Bois presents many alternative modes of thinking in the trilogy. She notes that the “profusion of alternatives . . . [is] most easily seen in the autobiographical elements of the trilogy.”¹⁸⁴ That is, the alternative modes of thinking are most easily seen in the characters that are in some ways reflections of Du Bois himself. The strong interpretation of Wilson’s assertions is that they are in fact Du Bois questioning and revising his earlier thought. Phillips also notes that “the appearance of so many doppelgängers in the novels . . . creates a sense of the novels as being retrospective,” as Du Bois rethinking his ideas, “reconsidering and presenting it anew.”¹⁸⁵

I argue for both interpretations as being correct. Du Bois is using the trilogy to present a wide variety of alternative ways of thinking and living that are ultimately the choice of the readers. But he is also revisiting and revising his own thought in the process. Du Bois is presenting the triumvirate in a new form, one based on the decades of work and experience that followed his earlier essays and that reflect his realization of the incommensurability of the transcendent realm and the finite realm. As discussed above, Edwards also finds in the trilogy Du Bois’s realization that “transcendence is impossible in human affairs.”¹⁸⁶ Perhaps, in “The Criteria of Negro Art” Du Bois is saying that for him truth, beauty, and goodness *should not* be unseparated and inseparable. Yet, in his late life and shown in his last work of fiction is the recognition

184. Phillips, “*The Black Flame Revisited*,” 165.

185. Ibid. 166.

186. Edwards, “Introduction,” xxx.

that in the realm of real and hard human affairs, the unseparated and inseparable triumvirate is not always realizable and inseparable. We should then be cautious and critical of the assumption that what is beautiful is also what is good and true.

Through Wilson, Du Bois uses a subtle irony both to critique a mistaken valuation of beauty as one dimensional and to reaffirm the deeper meaning of beauty. Wilson's warning, and Sojourner's story within the novel, point to the dangers of equating beauty with that which is externally pleasing or appealing. Reducing beauty to the external appearance is a one-dimensional view of beauty that neglects its deeper dimensions. Beauty should extend beyond the external and into the soul of a person. Taking a close look at Wilson's language, he clarifies that when one says something is good and true, what is meant is that it is wholesome, satisfying, and fulfilling. These are all essentially descriptors Du Bois has attributed to beauty. That which is wholesome is conducive to a person's physical and moral well-being. Much of what Du Bois has written demonstrates that beauty is crucial to human well-being. Beauty is a world where all people can enjoy life and realize themselves.¹⁸⁷ Beauty beckons the human soul, and without it we cannot truly live;¹⁸⁸ the beauty of life is the freedom of art and self-expression.¹⁸⁹ Finally, in "Of Beauty and Death," Du Bois clearly defines beauty as that which does satisfy and fulfill. The irony Du Bois deploys in the trilogy serves a dual purpose. It critiques the conception of beauty as a solely external attribute and recasts

187. See "The Criteria of Negro Art."

188. See "The Art and Art Galleries of Modern Europe."

189. See "The Revelation of Saint of Orgne the Damned."

beauty in a deeper light. Sojourner is never called beautiful, and in fact, she is exclusively referenced as having external features that are not beautiful. However, her deeper beauty is frequently highlighted as the observer, Wilson, and other characters take notice of her “beautiful soul,” her “greater self,” the way her music moves and entrances, and that into her music “went all the woman’s soul.”¹⁹⁰ Although she is not considered an external beauty, her inner beauty shines forth. In this world of human affairs, Sojourner, who at first is the most overlooked and woefully described character, becomes the most brilliant embodiment of inner beauty, truth, and goodness.

Transformative Aesthetics Revisited

The African American characters in the trilogy each experience the veil in different and constraining ways. As readers, we are witnesses to their struggles. Becoming absorbed into the *The Black Flame* trilogy as a work of art, we witness and virtually experience the lives of the Mansarts, the Du Bignons, the Breckinridges, and numerous other characters in the novels. This total absorption is the height of aesthetic experience according to Arnold Berleant, and for Christa Acampora (and for Erika Fischer-Lichte), it changes the audience. Acampora asserts that “art effects how we experience ourselves (our own form and its possibilities), our relations with others, and how we encounter and make sense of our worlds... Works of art *work* in and through us. It is in this way that aesthetic experience is transfiguring and transformative.”¹⁹¹ For Fischer-Lichte, art creates a space for passage where the audience, in engaging with the

190. Du Bois, *Mansart Builds a School*, 177, 180, 181.

191. Acampora, “Authorizing Desire,” 72. Emphasis in original.

work of art and the world it presents, can continually bring themselves forth anew. In other words, the audience is essentially revising their personhood and perspective again and again, since the space between art and the subjectivity of the audience members becomes traversable and amorphous. This aesthetic experience, therefore, allows us to move beyond our own subjectivities and perspectives, and into the feelings and experiences of others.

Being able to move beyond the borders of our own subjectivity and into the feeling of what it is like to be other is requisite for our ability to empathize. Acampora observes that imagining “ourselves as other is absolutely crucial for our growth as individuals . . . And imagining ourselves as other is an important way in which we build communities” and recognize “what would be required for us to pursue a common ideal.”¹⁹² *The Black Flame* underscores the oppressive and violent effects of racism and capitalistic greed. However, the novels also highlight the good that can be achieved through solidarity of common ideals, or rather, through a commitment to the criteria of truth, beauty, and goodness.

The class and race oppressions and the political injustices presented in the trilogy are not incompatible with the current United States and geopolitical climate. The question then becomes for us as witnesses to injustice, as it became for other characters and particularly for Manuel Mansart, “How shall Integrity face Oppression?”¹⁹³ This was the “life problem” that Mansart (and Du Bois) faces, but is never able to “answer to

192. Ibid. 73.

193. Du Bois, *The Ordeal of Mansart*, 241.

his own satisfaction.”¹⁹⁴ However, the novels do impress upon readers this question and its demand for an ever-evolving answer. Similar to “Of Beauty and Death,” the trilogy draws readers into a particular pace and tone. In “Of Beauty and Death,” the alternating juxtapositions of beauty and ugliness are meant to show the truth of both beauty and ugliness in this world.

The alternations are also meant to jar readers, and I would argue, place them in a position similar, though of course, not equal, to what African Americans must face. Namely, this is that the experience of beauty is fleeting, often denied to them, and in constant contention with racial violence and prejudice. This is particularly true of a society that nurtures and encourages, or systemically harbors a white supremacist logic, while denying the experience and any attribute of beauty to persons of color. Readers’ experiences of beauty in “Of Beauty and Death” are poetic, but momentary. The end of the eloquent passages on beauty are followed by passages on discrimination and violence. Therefore, readers experience constant unsettling and upset in their aesthetic experience as they move back and forth between beauty and ugliness.

Readers are drawn into this unsettling tone and pace much more powerfully in *The Black Flame*. In the trilogy, readers are immersed in a carefully developed narrative that seems to live and breathe through its historical events, fictional characters, and the evolving interconnections between them. Readers witness the growth, changes, and struggles of the characters, as well as the way in which decades of history unfold and

194. Ibid., 241.

impact the lives of particular families. At the end of the trilogy, and throughout each novel, as we become constant witnesses of the tragedy and violence that result from racism and greed, we must ask ourselves Mansart's and Du Bois's profound question: How shall integrity face oppression?

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION: A SUMMARY AND LOOKING AHEAD

In this thesis, I have focused on selected works of fiction and nonfiction by W.E.B. Du Bois. I have assessed his essays in order to analyze and reconstruct an important philosophical contribution he has made: namely, his political aesthetics. As I have shown, Du Bois predicates his political aesthetics on the concepts of truth, beauty, and goodness. However, far from a superficial declaration of their importance and axiomatic assertions of their definitions, Du Bois develops, deepens, and demonstrates the meaning of each in both his theoretical essays and in his works of fiction. Furthermore, he assigns each concept a moral and political function in the world, effectively transforming these concepts into cooperative criteria for life and creativity. Du Bois is an early pioneer in asserting the theoretical and practical interrelation between these three concepts, thereby showing the fundamental relationship between aesthetics, ethics, and the everyday condition of the political and social world.

One of the aims of my thesis was to show that not only does Du Bois's work deserve to be included among the canon of thinkers who postulate a relationship between politics, aesthetics, and ethics, but also to emphasize that Du Bois's political aesthetic project should be understood as a precursor to much later, and contemporary, movements that fuse aesthetics, art, and social-political issues and that imbue aesthetics and art with the potential for social, individual, and political transformation.

The main thrust of my thesis was supposed by a close examination of Du Bois's final and epic work of fiction, *The Black Flame* trilogy, for which a surprisingly scant amount of critical attention exists. The lack of critical inquiry into the trilogy constitutes an unfortunate gap in the scholarship on such an important figure whose thought spans the realms of both literature, sociology, history, and philosophy. Using Du Bois's own criteria for African American art, I looked at the roles truth, goodness, and beauty play in the novels. My central aim in analyzing *The Black Flame* was to explore how these concepts appeared and functioned within the trilogy. Since Du Bois uses the trilogy as a retrospective and introspective space, a second aim of my thesis was to identify any changes, revaluations, or reassertions he makes regarding the triumvirate. In reconstructing Du Bois's political aesthetic project, I argued that his use of the concept of truth can be considered in two senses: subjective truth and objective truth. In addition, through a careful mining of his key writings, I provided a fuller and more delineated account of his conceptions of beauty and goodness than they have received in much of the scholarship to date. In my analysis of *The Black Flame*, I examined the way certain characters, social spaces, and scenes connected to, or exemplified, his conceptions of truth, beauty, and goodness.

In addition, I explored how communism, which influenced Du Bois in his later years, figures into the trilogy. Kate A. Baldwin's book, *Beyond the Color Line and the Iron Curtain*, is particularly useful for this purpose as she focuses on the late writings of Du Bois to uncover the developments in his relationship to communism and the Soviet Union, as well as his growing dissatisfaction with the United States' promises of racial

equality. By examining a crucial scene at the end of the third novel, I analyzed the significance of communism in *The Black Flame*, and whether Du Bois uses the trilogy as propaganda for the political movement.

Looking forward, there is much in Du Bois's political aesthetic project and in *The Black Flame* that warrants further attention, and which can still speak to today's social and political climate, as well as academic research. As I have shown in this thesis, contemporary thinkers such as Arnold Berleant, Erika Fischer-Lichte, Christa Acampora, and many others are expanding the traditional boundaries and capabilities of art and aesthetics. Therefore, Du Bois's political aesthetics remains a fundamental and rich, though still insufficiently studied, resource for such scholars. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Du Bois already proposed art and aesthetics as a medium for, and inquiry into, the social and political conditions of the time. Now into the twenty-first century, as we witness continued racial violence and discrimination at the individual and state level, it is more important than ever to examine the thought and work of a man who wrote prolifically on these issues.

A question that remained central to Du Bois throughout his career, and a question which figures prominently in *The Black Flame*, is "How shall integrity face oppression?" We can find many answers to this question in his works, such as through a commitment to education, one's family, and community. His political aesthetics gives us an additional and related answer: through commitment to truth, beauty, and goodness. Within these concepts, Du Bois placed the ideas of self-understanding and development, the use of right reason, the pursuit and exposure of truth, and the use of one's total skills and power

(intellectual, moral, and physical) to advance the aims of justice, human fellowship, and political reform. Given the progress still to be made in such areas, it is important to look to the work of such thinkers as W.E.B. Du Bois, who speak directly to the problem of the color line that continues to cripple us to this day and who speak from a space of direct experience with systemic oppression and racial violence.

The Black Flame trilogy is a poignant work that spoke directly to the issues and movements of its time, as well as resuscitating a social and political history in new light. Du Bois's use of conspiracy, tragedy, madness, and death forces us to rethink and confront the hidden forces and powers that were able to manipulate the economic, political, and social climate during his long career. As such, his work was also prescient.

Du Bois's examination of class disparities, capitalism, political movements, education, the rise of big business and industries, and the structural, individual, and social effects racism—and the nuances and developments of each—all make his last work of fiction a complex, fascinating, and valuable resource for scholarly research across multiple, universally relevant fields.

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